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THE

MASKED GUIDE:

OR,

THE ROAD AGENTS OF THE PLAINS.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING DIME NOVELS:

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|--------------------------|--------------------------|
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THE

MASKED GUIDE.

CHAPTER I.

THE LIFE AND DEATH GRAPPLE.

A GIRL of some twenty summers, gayly swinging a dainty straw basket in one hand, while with the other she caressed the head of a small curly dog, that gamboled and frisked around her. A broad-brimmed straw flat adorned her head, while below it hung in thick profusion long, silken curls of a deep brown, waving and floating in the gentle breeze, that played around her form as though loth to leave such pleasant company.

As she turns her head, we see that it is a fair, pleasing face, not of the highest order of beauty, to be sure, but better—a sweet, *good* face, with clear, rosy cheeks, small, well-formed mouth, and bright, crimson lips that imprisoned two rows of pearly teeth. A tall, graceful form gave a slightly haughty air to her appearance, but one glance at her bright blue eye and pleasant features, dispelled any impression of pride or hauteur in that character.

As she nears the outskirts of the little clearing surrounding the cluster of log-houses denominated the village of Ireton, she met and passed an aged and silvery-haired man, with a few kind words and a loving smile. He paused, and gazed after the neat form that was tripping along so gayly and unconcerned :

“ Sweet Jessie Moss, no wonder all love you. So bright cheerful and kind. Bless thy pretty face !” and with a brighter smile playing around his mouth, the old gentleman pursued his way homeward.

Jessie soon left the little group of houses behind her, and proceeded toward the forest, now pausing to sport a moment with

Ponto, now plucking some simple wild-flower to fasten in her glossy curls, or merrily caroling a verse of some song as she slowly sauntered along the grass-grown path. Ere long she entered the woods, and slightly quickening her pace, she passes by the lovely wildwood blossoms that thickly studded the green sward, raising their heads and twinkling at her from their ~~grass~~ bed, as though wondering whether she was not an ~~angel~~, and if so, where were her wings?

The woods now appeared more open, the trees growing further apart, until at length Jessie entered a valley that was entirely devoid of underbrush. Here the object of her walk was apparent, for the grass was mottled with scarlet. In a short time she had filled her basket with the ripe, delicious strawberries, and again wandered through the forest, plucking the bright, many-hued flowers that grew on every side, filling her apron to running over.

Presently she reached a small brook that rippled merrily along through the woods, and after placing the basket of fruit in an eddy, where they would be kept cool and fresh, she sought out a soft, mossy seat at the foot of an old elm tree.

Here she twined some of the more brilliant flowers into a wreath, with which she decorated her brow. Ponto was lying at Jessie's side, gazing with half-closed eyes up into his mistress' face as she arranged the remaining flowers into a bouquet. The low, soft notes of a love-song were warbled with a sweetness that rivaled the woodland songsters that flitted from bough to bough in the tree overhead. There was a delicious freshness in her voice that reminded one of the fabled sirens of old.

The flowers were nearly all arranged, when a sudden bark and yelp of terror from Ponto startled her, and looking up with a quick, startled glance, Jessie's eyes fell upon an object that fairly froze her blood with terror. Her lips parted to emit a shriek, but fortunately her terror was so great as to prevent its utterance, and she sat still and motionless as a marble statue.

And no wonder, for it would be no shame for a strong man to feel alarmed under the circumstances. To be sitting totally defenseless, far from assistance, with scarce a half-score yards dividing you from the long, gaunt form of a full-grown panther, whose lips, drawn back, disclosed to view the cruel white fangs,

ears laid back, and the sharp yellow claws that pierce the ground with a terribly significant motion.

No wonder that she fell into a deathlike swoon while the panther was crouching to the ground as if about to spring upon and rend her in pieces. With an almost imperceptible motion of her head, Jessie slowly sunk back against the trunk of the tree by which she was still sitting.

Stealthily watching its intended victim, the wild beast crouched in the same spot where Jessie had first observed him, its long tail slowly sweeping the ground, only waiting for some motion or sign of life to make the fatal leap. For some moments it remained thus, then, with a noiseless, cat-like tread, began circling around the form of the still-unconscious maiden, at each revolution drawing nearer and nearer to the young girl.

Suddenly a footstep echoed through the glade, and at the same instant a low sigh broke from Jessie's lips, who was just returning to consciousness. Instantly the panther resumed its crouching position, and as Jessie raised one hand to her face, he flattened his body still more, and with every nerve stretched to its utmost tension made his dread leap.

The beast was still in mid-air when a sharp report echoed through the woods, and with a wild scream of agony, the furious animal fell in a writhing heap at the feet of the now conscious maiden. A terrified shriek burst from her pallid lips, that was mingled with a clear, encouraging shout, as a tall, agile form bounded forward, and grasping the struggling animal with his naked hands, cast it with violence from the feet of Jessie. Then drawing a knife, the young man approached the wounded panther with the intention of killing it.

With a low growl the beast recovered its feet, and regarded the hunter with a menacing look in its fiery eyes. The blood was slowly dripping from a wound between the eyes, where the bullet had glanced harmlessly off, only inflicting a painful flesh wound, and partially stunning it for the time being. The hunter still continued to approach, when, with a shrill yell, the infuriated beast sprung upon him, and bore him back to the ground.

By an almost superhuman effort, the young man cast the animal from his body, and rising upon one knee he clutched the panther by the throat with his left hand, while his right

drove the long, keen blade to the hilt in the beast's side. Again the knife sought the seat of life, and again those cruel talons tore and rended the hunter's flesh.

The dreadful conflict raged minute after minute; both man and beast were growing faint from loss of blood, and it was difficult to determine which would be the victor. At length, the heroic young stranger elevated the hand clasping his knife, the panther struck it with its paw, sending it far from the owner's hand, thus leaving him totally unarmed and at the raging animal's mercy.

A cry of despair burst from the man's lips at this catastrophe, yet he grappled with the beast, striving to throttle it. As Jessie heard the exclamation, and saw the crimsoned steel hurled almost at her feet, she cast off the incubus of horror that had fettered her limbs, grasped the weapon, and, regardless of the fierce growls that came from the enraged animal, ran forward, and the next moment the handle of the blood-stained knife was tightly clenched in the right hand of the almost exhausted youth.

With hope renewed in his breast at this unexpected assistance, the stranger plunged the keen blade again and again into the writhing form of his antagonist. All this time those terrible claws were tearing and lacerating his shoulder and breast in a most fearful manner, while the ground around them was mottled with pools of fast-coagulating blood.

Growing desperate, the man relinquished his grasp upon the panther's throat, and driving his knife to the hilt in the animal's neck, grasping the haft with both hands, he almost severed the beast's head from its body. With one convulsive quiver, the sinewy limbs relaxed their grasp, and the brute fell upon his side, dead!

Rising to his feet, the victor gazed around him, and, as his eyes fell upon the form of the beautiful girl, he muttered, in a feeble tone:

"Saved, thank God!"

As he uttered these words his tall, graceful form reeled for a moment, then tottering forward a few steps, he fell upon his face in a deep swoon. A piercing cry from Jessie, as she saw her brave deliverer fall, apparently dead, and the next moment his head was pillow'd upon her lap, while with frantic efforts

she endeavored to restore him to sensibility. When she saw that all her efforts were in vain, a strange, wild fear fluttered at her heart, for she thought the bold youth was dead—had died in her defense.

Gently lowering his head to the ground, and snatching up her hat, she hastened to the brook, where she filled it to the brim with clear, cold, sparkling water, and dashed it into the face of the wounded hunter. After repeating this several times, Jessie again raised his head to her lap, and with beseeching words entreated the young man to come back to life; and overcome by her feelings she repeatedly pressed her sweet lips to his broad, white brow.

It would seem that such restoratives would waken one from the grave, especially when applied as plentifully as in the present case; but for a time even that failed of the desired effect. All things must have an end, however, and at length the wounded man slowly unclosed his eyelids, and revealed to Jessie's gaze a pair of dark and lustrous eyes.

A bright glow of crimson overspread Jessie's features as she met his ardent gaze of wonder and admiration. In a few gentle tones, that sounded upon his senses like the musical coo of the dove, she began to murmur her heartfelt thanks for his having saved her life, when he begged of her never again to mention it, saying that it was no more than any man would have done for so beautiful a being, who—

And Jessie, with a still deeper blush tingling her checks, put a stop to his rhapsody by placing her rosy palms over his mouth. Fortunately both were brought back to earth again by several severe twinges of pain, caused by the panther's tearing claws and teeth, that drew a half-stifled exclamation of pain from the lips of the hunter, while the cold beads of agony started out upon his forehead.

As Jessie could do nothing by herself to relieve his pain, she gently lowered his head upon her apron for a pillow, and assuring him that she would soon return, with assistance, sped away with step as light as a fawn. Not once did she pause, but hastened onward with flying feet, but with heart as heavy as lead, for she feared the result of the drama just enacted.

At length she reached the village and soon paused at the door of old Dr. Morton, who fortunately was at home. In a few

hasty words Jessie explained the events of the day, and implored him to come to the wounded man's assistance immediately, with help if necessary.

In a short time they were on their way, with two stout men bearing blankets and pillows, with an ax wherewith to fashion a litter.

When the old elm tree was reached Jessie paused with a look of terror upon her face, for the youth looked so pale and ghastly that she feared he was dead. But her forebodings were soon relieved, for the doctor pronounced it but a swoon, caused from excessive pain and loss of blood. While the good old man was applying restoratives, the two borderers were arranging a litter. Two slender poles were cut, and smaller branches laid across them, the whole covered with the blankets the doctor's forethought had provided.

Then, as the wounded man was still unconscious, they deftly stripped the panther of its hide. This was placed across the foot of the litter, and then the man was gently lifted and placed in as comfortable a position as possible. Despite the care used, a groan of agony broke from the stranger's lips, and his eyes opened with an expression of bewilderment in their depths. He strove to rise, but the movement called forth another groan, and sinking back, he muttered :

"I remember now. Where is my horse?"

"We have seen no horse; where did you leave him?" asked Dr. Morton.

"Take the whistle from my neck and blow it. He will come."

As the shrill, prolonged trill of the ivory whistle rung through the woods, it was answered by a prolonged neigh, followed by the quick tramp of iron-shod hoofs, and a noble steed bounded to the side of the litter, and with a low whinny of delight, pressed its velvet muzzle against the cheek of its master. It was a large, well-built, iron-gray, mottled with black in its hind-quarters, and caparisoned with a military saddle and paraphernalia. The wounded man passed his hand over the horse's face, and then sunk back exhausted.

The litter was now taken up by the two borderers, while Dr. Morton led the horse, and in a short time the village was reached, and the cortége passed before Dr. Morton's house,

while the worthy doctor entered, to explain matters, as well as to have a bed arranged for the wounded man.

The building, originally a double log-house—that is, a large square room at either end, connected by a covered passage or porch—consisted of three good-sized rooms, the passage-way now being walled in; and a kind of out-door kitchen. A fence of paling split from the white-oak tree, surrounded a neat vegetable garden in the rear of the building, while at the sides and front the ornamental beds of flowers and shrubbery gave evidence of the good taste and industry of Miss Jessie.

While arrangements are being made for the reception of the wounded man, a few words regarding the Moss family, and how they came to settle in the border town of Ireton, may not be amiss.

The outbreak of the California gold fever, in '49, found Wyvil Moss in New York, fighting the wolf from the door, having been reduced in a single moment from great wealth to bankruptcy, by a series of unfortunate speculations. After his affairs were settled up, and all debts paid, he found that he had less than a thousand dollars that he could call his own. His family consisted of but his wife, a son, and one daughter.

Procuring a situation for Fred, he placed the money in bank in his wife's name, only deducting enough to buy a mining outfit. Then he joined a wagon-train as teamster, and so reached the "New El Dorado." With one "partner," he struck up the country, and finally opened a claim on the north fork of the Rio de los Plumas, or "Feather River." Fortune favored them from the first, and a rich lead or pocket of nuggets was struck, just before reaching the "bed-rock."

Toward the close of the next year's working season, Wyvil Moss returned to New York, only to find a house of mourning. Frederick having died several days before, after a short illness. This fact, combined with the continued ill-health of his wife, induced him to remove West, in hopes that in a clearer climate her health would be restored.

Joining company with several families, they started, and finally decided to settle where we now find them. Every winter, however, was spent in the East, as the prairie winters were too severe for Mrs. Moss, who was still delicate, although considerably invigorated by the change.

From time to time other travelers would pause, attracted by the beautiful situation and virgin soil that could be had for the mere improving it, until, at the time in question, over two-score houses were dignified by the appellation of Ireton.

CHAPTER II.

THE TRAGEDY OF THE PLAINS.

DR. MORTON pronounced the wounds of the stranger severe, but not dangerous, and that with good care he would be able to resume his journey in a fortnight. And this, it is needless to say, the good people heard with satisfaction, for Jessie was the idol of her parents' heart, and nothing they could say or do was too much to testify their gratitude to him who had so gallantly risked his life for hers.

A few days after his introduction, the stranger told his story. That his home was in Chicago, his father a wealthy banker, and he being an only child was allowed his choice as to which line of life he should follow. Choosing the regular army, he was now a captain--Captain Hart Toulmin. That his regiment was now stationed at Fort Leavenworth, and that he had been sent on official business to Fort Riley. That he was riding leisurely along when he noted the crouching panther, but could not see its prey, as the tree-trunk intervened. He dismounted, and taking his carbine discharged the timely shot as already stated.

The packet was intrusted to a reliable man to be conveyed to Fort Riley, and a note, detailing the cause of his forced delay, sent to Toulmin's commanding officer at Leavenworth. Then, as Hart grew stronger, he, together with Jessie, would take daily walks, that gradually grew longer as his energy slowly returned; or else they would mount their horses for a long, wild race over the rolling prairie.

Either Jessie's parents must have been woefully blind, or they were not averse to the idea of calling the gay, dashing officer "son-in-law." For there could be but one ending to the

long tête-à-têtes the young people were allowed to enjoy. Besides the enchantment thrown around Hart, by the courage he had shown in saving her from so fearful a death, he was young, handsome, and possessed an excellent education.

And so it was no wonder that Jessie found herself thinking far more about the fascinating stranger than she would care to acknowledge, even to herself—far more than was prudent of a perfect stranger. And he? Ah, well; he poured into her willing ear the tale of his love in words so ardent, so eloquent, apparently so full of sincerity, that one far less enchanted than Jessie would have had no doubt of his truthfulness—one day while sitting beneath the spreading branches of the old elm tree where they had first met.

She listened in silence. Her heart was too full of calm, holy happiness for her to break the spell by words. But her silence could not be misconstrued, and for the first time her lips were pressed by a man, other than her father.

The hours rolled on unheeded, and the lovely sunset found them still seated upon the mossy bank. Then as the shades grew more dense, Jessie aroused herself with an effort, and they walked slowly, arm in arm, homeward. That night, after supper, Jessie left the room, and Hart told the father and mother how dearly he loved their child, and asked her hand in marriage, offering to resign his commission and settle down in Ireton if they were not willing to remove to Chicago.

The mother sought her daughter, while Wyvil Moss meditated upon the proposition. At length his answer was given, as follows: If Hart Toulmin could produce unquestionable evidence of his good moral character, and if his prospects in life were such as would justify him in marrying, then his fate rested with Jessie. If she consented, then no obstacles would be cast in his way.

With this, Hart professed himself satisfied, saying he would return to Leavenworth and procure the necessary papers, and hasten to lay them before Mr. Moss. And early the next morning, after a short farewell with Jessie, the captain mounted his noble iron-gray charger, and set out upon his journey.

The next few days passed drearily enough to Jessie, and she

wandered frequently to the spots that were made sacred in her eyes, by the happy moments she had spent there in company with him whom she loved so truly. She was not happy ; her heart was full of forebodings, nameless fears that she could not fathom. For she never, even for a moment, doubted the truth of Hart Toulmin ; only there was a dread of something fearful that seemed about to befall her. In vain she strove to banish it ; sleeping or waking it stood before her, vague and undefined, yet none the less horrible.

One pleasant afternoon a miserable-looking object entered the village. Bareheaded and almost naked, wounded and wayworn, it was with difficulty that one could discern the skin of a white man beneath all this. Not replying to the eager questioning of those who surrounded him, the stranger staggered on until he reached the gate of Wyvil Moss. Then entering, he stepped up to the open door, but as if his strength had been only granted him to reach this haven, he tottered and fell upon the floor like a dead man.

But it proved to be only a swoon, caused by great fatigue and hardships. A couch was hastily prepared, and after laying the stranger upon it, the face was cleansed of the thick layer of blood and grime that had fairly caked. An exclamation of wonder broke from the doctor's lips, and he uttered the name of Floyd Spencer. The name passed from mouth to mouth, in astonishment, for it was that of one of their old friends, who together with his family had joined a wagon-train bound for California, some time previously. And great was the curiosity and anxiety to learn what had so greatly reduced the gay, blithesome youth to such a woeful strait, for the Spencer family had been highly esteemed during their residence in Ireton, and had made themselves loved by all.

Not until after several days was the young man able to command himself sufficiently to enter into details, but he had let enough escape him during his temporary delirium to show that he alone of all the gay, hopeful company he had joined was now alive. But one evening he told his tale, as follows :

" When two days out from Ireton we were joined by a gentlemanly appearing man of nearly thirty, as I should judge. He told a plausible tale of how he had accidentally become

separated from his company, and requested leave to join us. This was readily granted, and he soon became a general favorite with both old and young. It seemed as though none could resist his smooth, winning way, save Zenas Gale our queer little red-headed guide, who watched him like a cat does a mouse. He privately warned our leader, but as he could give no satisfactory reasons, only that he "looked like a snake," Captain Neil Moore, was esteemed still more highly, if that could be.

"Well, we reached the Sweetwater in safety, and as it was at a very high stage, we determined to lie over for one day, as it would be risky crossing just then. We went into camp about three o'clock, and several, among whom was Moore, sallied out for game. It was after midnight when he returned, and his horse, a magnificent animal, was reeking with sweat and ready to drop from fatigue. This fact he explained by saying that in chasing a buffalo, he had lost his bearings, and only retraced his way with great difficulty.

"The next day, after a scout, Gale said he had discovered Indian signs. About noon three Cheyennes rode alone to the camp, making signs of peace, two of them being squaws. The brave left his arms, together with the horses, upon the prairie, and then was allowed to enter the lines.

"Our leader had offered a couple of trifling prizes for the best wrestler and leaper, and all the men were gathered around either as spectators or contestants, with the exception of Zeno Gale. All the weapons had been stacked beneath a tree that grew within the corral. During the trials of skill, other Indians had come in, after disarming themselves as the first had, nearly one-half of them squaws. No persons noticed their growing numbers save the guide, and when he mentioned it to Captain Warnock he was testily told that if he was afraid of a parcel of unarmed squaws he might get into the wagon with the women and babies.

"After this he took his station, rifle in hand, near the stack of arms, with his back against the trunk of the tree. The sports went on and a number of Indians joined in the games, while their numbers still increased, but so gradually as to escape general notice. But at length the prizes were awarded, and as if by magic the Indians separated from the crowd

and joined the group of squaws that were seated near the tree.

"The man who called himself Neil Moore raised the horrible war-whoop of the Cheyennes, and drawing a revolver with each hand, shot down Mr. Warnock and another. Then the squaws cast aside their blankets, and beneath them were shortened rifles, knives and tomahawks, which the braves seized, and then began a horrible massacre. The bewildered men stood at first like sheep to be shot down unresistingly, only one of them prepared.

"At the first signal, Gale drew bead upon the renegade, Moore, but one of the squaws caught him by the wrist and tried to throw him down. The rifle was discharged, but it did no injury. Then he dashed the steel-shod butt of the weapon upon the squaw's head, who had saved the arch-fiend from a well-merited fate. Drawing his revolvers, he singled out his mark with the coolness of a hunter shooting quail, and at every report one of the foe would utter his death-shriek.

"The men now cast off their stupor, and grasping any weapon they could lay hands upon, fought as only men can fight who are doing battle for all that is dear to them; but their numbers were sadly thinned. Twice a crowd of the dusky imps rushed against Zene Gale, and twice they were driven back by the storm of leaden hail that scattered the green-sward with dead and dying forms. When the revolvers were emptied, he hurled them at the foe, and stooped to gather others that lay at his feet. But before he could rise erect, a tomahawk stroke upon the head leveled him across the weapons.

"Of my own deeds I can recall but little. At first I stood as if petrified; the terrible suddenness of the attack stupefied me. But, as I saw a huge, brawny savage bury his hatchet in the brain of poor dear Clay, my brother, I started into life, and with the sickening, crashing sound mingled with the faint moan of agony still ringing through my brain, I leaped upon the murderer, clutching his throat with a grasp of iron and bore him to the ground. It was so sudden and unexpected that the fall forced his hatchet from his hand, and before he could arise I had seized the weapon, and with one blow clove his head in twain. With one quick glance around me, I

mixed in the *melée* and showered my blows wherever I could distinguish the dusky skin of a foeman.

"In that glance I saw that the massacre must soon end, for want of victims. Less than a dozen whites were upon their feet, and not one of these unharmed. The squaws were doing their part; they were in the wagons, butchering the defenseless women and children. I could see the bleeding forms of my father and brother, and the guide. I saw the tall, graceful form of him whom we had known as Captain Neil Moore, dealing death and gaping wounds at every blow, and parrying those aimed at him in return, as if he bore a charmed life. I saw a wounded man hardly pressed by two savages, and rushed to his assistance. I cut down one of them, receiving at the same time a severe wound upon the head that blinded me, and staggering onward a few steps, fell close beside a scrubby bush that partially concealed me from the view of the savages.

"I could not have remained insensible for any length of time, but when I opened my eyes, the butchery was at an end, and while some were plundering the wagons, others were doing the same to those who had fallen. I knew that if I remained where I was, discovery was certain, and to be found was death. So, painfully but cautiously I crawled down to the river, and entering it, dove down-stream as long and far as I could without taking breath. When I arose I only allowed my nose to appear above water, then dove again. At length I crawled, exhausted, under a dense overhanging bush, where, with my head above water, I was still securely concealed.

"While there I could plainly hear the wild and triumphant yells of the Cheyennes, as they exulted in the victory they had obtained over the emigrants. Then the din increased and I knew they had discovered a couple of kegs of whisky that was stowed away in one of the wagons. The tumult deepened until I was nearly deafened, and it seemed as if all the fiends of the lower regions had been loosed to carouse over the massacre that had just ended.

"Then I heard the harsh creaking of ungreased axles, as the wagons were moved, and then the hideous screeching was redoubled. In a few moments a brilliant light from the camp began to dissipate the fast-gathering twilight, and the red glare revealed the ~~flashing~~ surface of the river and surrounding

objects with the distinctness of midday, reaching even to where I was concealed. The wagons, and such plunder as was too bulky for removal, were being destroyed.

"I heard a loud uproar as of men in disputation, followed by a single whoop, mingled with the clear crack of a revolver. For a moment all was still, then I could distinguish the loud, firm tones of the renegade, but could not tell what he was saying. Perhaps a quarrel had arisen concerning some coveted article, and as there was but one shot fired, the settlement must have been summary.

"When my mind became more composed, I began to suffer considerably from my wounds, several of which were quite severe. This, together with the dreadful thoughts that I could not banish, of my murdered father, brother, mother and sisters, nearly drove me crazy.

"The orgies were kept up without intermission all night, and the whole time I was forced to keep myself buried to the neck in the icy-cold water, for the drunken, half-crazy fiends were roving through the wood or along the river's bank, as fancy led them, and I knew that discovery would be instant death, and for all I was so wretched, I chose to live longer. I had work to do, an end to accomplish, and that was *revenge*. Revenge upon the whole red-skinned race, but more especially the renegade who called himself Neil Moore.

"Twice during that long night I heard the blood-curdling shrieks and groans of some drunken wretch, as he fell into the fire, and his comrades' shouts of merriment at their unavailing efforts to escape from the devouring element.

"At last the sun rose, and bearing nothing, toward noon I ventured from my covert, and found that the robbers had disappeared. But, oh, my God! what a scene they left behind them! I can not describe it—words are powerless. Enough that my worst fears were realized. A few short hours before, I formed one of a living, happy family of six. Now, I alone remained, with barely life enough to perform the last sacred rites for those whom I had loved so dearly.

"I conveyed as best I could—how I can not say—the remains of my dear ones down to the water's edge. Then I collected such fragments of the wagons as I thought would answer my purpose, and together with a couple of decayed but buoyant

logs, I formed from them a good-sized, substantial raft. On this I placed my dead, and searching around I found a revolver hidden in a bush, and an old ax. Then pushing from shore, I was soon floating down the river with my ghastly freight. With a piece of board I managed to steer clear of all obstructions, and just before sundown I landed upon a long, low island, partially covered with willows.

"With great pain and perseverance, I managed to excavate a pit large enough to answer the purpose of a grave for my dead, and I believe I offered up a prayer ere I covered them from sight, but I remember nothing until late the next afternoon, when I awoke from a swoon. As I knew I should soon perish if I remained where I was, I once more started my raft down the river. But my ill-fortune still followed me, for, while in the swift current, my float struck with such force against a snag that it went to pieces, and I was cast into the water. Instinctively I struck out for shore, for my will had nothing to do with it. I was in a maze, or trance-like state, and cared not whether I lived or died.

"However, I succeeded in reaching shore, but when I recalled my feeble state, the distance I was from any point where I might hope to receive help, and found that both my revolver and ax were lost, at the bottom of the river, is it a wonder that I cursed my fate and longed to die? But then I thought of him who was the cause of all this, and started upon my wearisome journey.

"I will not detain you longer by detailing the sufferings and hardships I was forced to undergo, before I finally arrived at Fort Riley; but for three days I had nothing to eat save prairie crickets and grasshoppers. At this place I told my story and asked for help—nay, I begged it upon my bended knees—to avenge my murdered kindred. But no; I was presumptuous in wishing it. In what did my wrongs concern *them*?

"When I was able to put one foot before another, I started for this place, ragged, sick and upon foot, as I entered the fort. You know the rest, and that I intend, as soon as I am able, raising a body of men, for the sole purpose of ferreting out this Moore. From what I have since learned, I have reason to believe that he is leader of a band of prairie pirates, who

rendezvous somewhere among the Black Hills" concluded Floyd Spencer.

"What kind of an appearing man is this Neil Moore?" asked Wyvil Moss.

"Just imagine a man between twenty-five and thirty, fully six feet high, rather slender, but lithe and powerful as a panther; clear complexion, dark-brown hair worn rather long, mustache a shade lighter, straight nose and large, brown eyes, and you have a fair idea," replied Spencer, not noting the change in his host's face as the description proceeded.

The three listeners looked at each other with startled glances. They each read their fears confirmed in the eyes of the others. No need to utter the question aloud; it was well—ah, only too well—understood!

Then Wyvil Moss spoke, as Jessie slowly drooped, and reeled in her chair.

"Tend to daughter, mother; she's going to faint. May God forgive me if I wrong him by a thought, but I really fear that we have been nursing a serpent that will turn and sting us at last! Floyd," he added, "your description corresponds exactly with that of the man who saved our Jessie's life. How long ago did this massacre occur?"

"On the 9th of April," was the reply.

"And we saw him on the 3d day of June. I fear they are the same! I feel it in my heart!"

CHAPTER III.

THE SWOOP OF THE VULTURE.

THE days slowly passed on, and nearly a month had elapsed since the departure of Captain Hart Toulmin for Fort Leavenworth, yet nothing had been heard from him. And this unaccountable silence served to still further confirm the suspicion in Wyvil Moss' mind that the renegade of Floyd Spencer's story was none other than he whom they had so tenderly nursed. This fear was shared by his wife, but Jessie had

speedily overcome the first dread that had flashed upon her, and almost hated herself for entertaining even a momentary doubt of her lover's integrity, and longed for his coming, that he might vindicate himself.

But as days and weeks rolled around her restlessness increased, and she often roamed for miles, unmindful what she was doing or where she was going. Floyd Spencer often joined her, and it was plain to all except the one most deeply interested, that he was fast learning to worship the fair Jessie. Her parents did not object, for, apart from their having no fault to find with Floyd, they thought that if the eyes of Jessie could be brought to look impartially upon the handsome youth, the task of forgetting the unworthy Toulmin would not be so hopeless. But as yet she regarded him only as a friend.

One hot, sultry summer day, Jessie was wandering along one of the walks rendered sacred in her eyes from its association with the man she had learned to love so ardently, and despair was in her heart, for she feared those pleasant days had vanished, never to return—when the sharp ringing of a horse's iron-shod hoofs, going in a gallop, smote upon her ear. The hot blood surged to her face, while her heart gave one leap and then stood still.

In a few moments the horseman appeared. Ah, how well she knew that iron-gray steed, and the rider! With outstretched arms she sprung forward, and called him by name. He leaped from the saddle, and the next moment she was tightly clasped in his arms, while he showered hot, passionate kisses upon her brow and lips. Half frightened at his almost fierce ardor, Jessie withdrew from his embrace and murmured:

“Oh, Hart, you don't know how deeply I have suffered during your absence! Why did you stay away so long without letting us hear from you?”

“My darling, I can and will explain all satisfactorily. Rest assured 'twas not my fault. Did you doubt me, Jessie?”

“Never; but you don't know the dreadful things you are accused of. They say you are the leader of a band of robbers, and that you caused the massacre of a train of emigrants last April, upon the banks of the Sweetwater.”

“They say! And who are they, if I may ask, that interest

themselves so deeply in my affairs?" he hastily uttered, while a fierce scowl distorted his handsome features, that escaped Jessie's notice.

"We were told so by one of the emigrants who managed to escape. His name is—" said Jessie, when she was interrupted by a person calling her name, and the next moment Floyd Spencer stood before them.

"Miss Jessie, I have been hunting you this half-hour. Your mother—"

Then, as he caught sight of the man's face, he started, and uttered a wild, deadly laugh.

"Captain Neil Moore, so we meet again, renegade—murderer! My God, I thank thee!" and he leaped toward his foe, with a long knife glittering in his hand.

The latter nimbly sprung aside, thus avoiding the blow that was aimed at his heart, and as the young man passed him, dealt him a stunning blow with his fist just behind the ear, that felled him like a log, the blood gushing from his ears, mouth and nostrils.

"By all the fiends in Tartarus, the game is blocked! I thought he was killed with the rest. Curse the luck! I must leave, just as the fruit was falling into my mouth," he raged. Then turning to Jessie, who stood as if petrified at the scene, "But come, girl, I will not leave *you*, at any rate;" and he caught her by the arm and dragged her to where his horse was still standing.

"What would you do?—who are you? Speak and tell me that what *he* said was false!" she cried, as he mounted the horse, holding her before him.

"As to who I am, I answer, your very humble servant and devoted lover, Captain Hart Toulmin; and I am going to take *you* with me upon a little journey—our wedding-tour, if it please you, my angel," and he laughed a sardonic laugh, so strange and horrible that he seemed no longer the same man.

Jessie shuddered, and then, as she comprehended all—realized that the man she had so tenderly loved was of a verity the demon he had been pictured—indeed, the words he had uttered, "*I thought he was killed with the rest*," had convicted him—she sunk into a deathlike swoon.

The noble horse bounded away in obedience to the merci

less spur that was fiercely applied to his flanks, and the trees seemed to fly past them with the speed of thought. The forest was left behind them, and the prairie reached, but still the pace was unabated, while mile after mile was placed between them and the once-happy home, too soon, alas, to be made a house of mourning.

The sun was far down the western sky, when, with a faint moan, Floyd Spencer slowly and painfully rose erect, and gazed around him with a bewildered air, striving to recollect what had happened. Then, as his gaze fell upon the gleaming knife lying upon the greensward, the truth flashed across his mind, and stooping, he began examining the footprints before him.

Novice as he was in the art, he could easily see that the horse had been doubly loaded, and that Jessie had not gone of her own accord; that a degree of force had been used.

With a groan of despair he recalled what a fearful start the outlaw would have before pursuit could be made, and hastening at the top of his speed he soon reached the village, and telling every man he met to follow him, he paused before the door of Wyvil Moss, who, together with his wife and a stranger, appeared at the sound of the uproar, as every man asked his neighbor what was the matter. Then Spencer spoke:

"I have sad, terrible news to tell you, friends, but it must be told. You all know my story, and that the company I belonged to were butchered by the Indians, led by a white man. And you know, too, the person that saved Miss Jessie Moss from the panther. I now swear to you that they are one and the same person: I met him to-day, with Miss Moss, and tried to kill him, but Satan saved him, and he knocked me senseless. Then he carried off—Moss, look to your wife, man!" and the latter turned just in time to catch his fainting wife in his arms, and then bore her into the house. "Yes, he has stolen the one we all loved so well! And now I ask you, men, shall he go free, or shall we deal with him as he deserves?"

There was but one answer, and every man hastened to his horse to prepare for speedy pursuit, save the stranger who had come out from the house of Wyvil Moss. As Spencer

turned to enter the door, he noted him for the first time, and stared in mute amazement, for he recognized one whom he thought dead.

"Yelpin' coyotes! ef 'tain't, call me a horned frog! Whoop-ee, younker, gin us y'ur paw; I thort ye war rubbed out, shore!" shouted the queer little red-faced, red-headed man, as he grasped Floyd's hand, wringing it as though he would squeeze it dry, while his moccaised feet kept up a sort of double-shuffle.

"Zenas Gale, is it possible! Why, I saw you killed once."

"Squeelin' painters! hain't it funny! Two dead men a meetin' an' shakin' han's. But I was party nigh wiped out, I was, but the hatchet kinder glanced an' on'y jist stunded me. Then, when they's cleanin' out the rest an' listin' that ha'r, I comed-to, an' when a dratted nigger tried the game on me, I fatched 'im a swipe over the noddle wi' a pistil-butt. Then I grapped a animile an' vamosed.

"Roarin' busslers! what a hullabaloo they sot up as I ske-daddled, an' a wheen o' the 'tarnal critters put arter me, lickity split; but as I had a good hoss, a leetle arter sundown they gin up the chase fer a bad job. I put fer a crug hole as I knowed on, whar I laid up fer a spell, till I got well. I larnt —the how is too long a yarn to tell jest now—that the cussed white Injun as led us inter the trap 'd bin seen in these parts, so I moseyed down an' jest got hyar to-day," concluded the guide.

"And in good time, too," replied Spencer, "for I know of no man I would rather meet this moment than yourself. There are some good hunters here, but not one who can equal you, unless it is old Hank Triplett. Of course you go with us after this Moore, or Toulmin, or whatever he chooses to call himself?"

"Pizen sarpints, won't I, though? Ye kin jest bet y'ur bottom dollar on that keerd, boy. I tell ye I don't 'low to do nothin' else ontill that air double an' twisted snappin'-turtle is flopped onter his back. Jest mark that down, 'c'ase I mean it; ef I don't, call me a turkey-buzzard!" declared Gale, as they entered the house.

It was now so late in the afternoon that with some demurring it was decided not to start upon the trail until daybreak.

The reason for this was that not over a mile or two could be made before darkness put a stop to their pursuit, as there was a new moon. And then they knew there was slight hope of overtaking the abductor, for they had no horse that could compare with the matchless one he rode, even on equal terms, while he had sufficient start to reach his haunts in safety, before they could overtake him. Then the party could be more thoroughly organized and prepared ; nothing was left but to depend upon the skill of the two scouts, Zeno Gale and Hank Triplett, and that would require time.

CHAPTER IV.

HAND TO HAND !

AT earliest dawn the trail was struck and followed over the soft, easily-indented prairie, at a hard gallop, for there was no attempt at concealment and the hoof-marks were deep. This pace was kept up with but little variation until an hour after noon, when the bank of a considerably-sized stream, one of the tributaries of the Sweetwater, was reached, where a halt was ordered to rest the horses.

The robber had evidently paused for some time at this point, but his trail finally led into the stream and was lost upon the hard, gravelly bottom. The scouts advanced alone and carefully examined the shore. Then they crossed over, one going up, the other down stream, to ascertain if the outlaw had crossed. After a short time they returned, and sat down to the cold viands in silence.

Sandy McLean, a young dare-devil Scotchman, asked Zene Gale which way the trail led, or if they had failed to learn. This nettled the fiery scout, for he deemed his skill as trailer questioned, and he testily replied, with his mouth full of cold meat :

“ Creepin’ lizards ! any fool kid tell *thet* with half an eye.”

“ Just so ; that’s the **very** reason I asked you,” was the quick reply.

"Snappin'-turtles!" ejaculated Gale, almost choking himself with a chunk of corn-bread, "thet 'minds me o' somethin' as happined to me in St. Louey. Ye see, I was in a *hot-el* thar, an' got to tellin' yarns to a lot o' city sellers, when one on 'em said, sorter low like: 'What a 'xeccentric seller he is!' I got up from my chair, like this," rising from the ground and drawing closer to McLean, "an' reached over to whar he was a settin,' an' says I: 'Y'ur another!' an' fotted him a stinger, jest this way," dealing a lightning-like blow at the Scotchman, that, had it taken effect, would have ended the dispute then and there.

But it was swiftly parried, while the young man replied:

"And if he was a man he did just as I do now," making a feint with his left, while Gale, in warding it off, exposed the lower part of his face, and the hard, bony fist was planted fairly upon the scout's chin, lifting him clear from his feet, so that his head struck the ground first.

The astonished scout rose to a sitting position, and while holding his jaw with one hand extended the other, mumbling:

"Gin us y'ur paw, younker; I sees ye know how to end a yarn. No 'fence, s'pose?"

"Not in the least," and the friendship there began ended bat in death.

The party now spurred rapidly up the river, for the outlaw had not crossed, and it was highly improbable that he had gone down-stream, as that would lead him toward the settlement; while upward was the most direct route to the Black Hills, where it was probable he had his band. His object in entering the water was easily conjectured. By breaking the trail he would delay any party in pursuit, should such follow immediately, and thus afford him plenty of time to reach a place of safety without overtasking the strength of his horse. Such was the conclusion arrived at.

After a short time the party separated, one portion going on either side of the river, led by Gale and Triplett, so as to run no risk of missing the point where the outlaw emerged from the river. Several miles were traversed without any discovery, when a wild yell was heard, and a horde of painted savages charged from a clump of trees toward the band led by Triplett.

They were distant fully a quarter of a mile, and the whites entered the river to join their comrades. Luckily the water was not deep, and they quickly crossed ; then, under lead of Gale, they flew at full speed for a timber *motte*, several miles distant.

They were outnumbered three to one, and upon the open ground the well-mounted Indians could ride all around the wearied horses of the whites, with their fresher animals. Their passage might have been checked at the river for a time, but their numbers were great enough to allow a portion to ride both up and down the stream, then cross, while the main body engaged the borderers. No, their only chance of safety lay in reaching the *motte* first. With the advantage of cover, they might hope to beat off the foe until night when the darkness would aid them in escape.

These reflections flashed through the minds of all, in a moment, and their horses were urged on with both voice and spur. The hooting and yelling Indians had crossed the stream, and were slowly but surely overhauling the fugitives, who had lost some distance in joining their forces, several of their horses not taking to the water kindly. The distance was lessened nearly one-half already, and in a few more moments the bullets began to hurtle after them.

The two scouts each managed to pick off a man, and reload their rifles, when the *motte* was reached, and hastily throwing themselves from their saddles, a deadly volley of bullets was poured into the dense body of pursuers. Several saddles were emptied, but still the painted demons came on. Then the revolvers of the whites began to play, in the hands of those well used to the weapon. The savages faltered, then turned and hastily fled beyond range. They could not stomach the storm of leaden hail ; indeed, the red-man has not yet been found who will do so for any length of time.

Eleven savages were lying upon the prairie, either cold and still in death, or writhing in mortal agony, while others were seen reeling in their seats when they retreated.

One of the white men had been killed during the race, two others wounded, one mortally, while there were nearly half a score who were injured, more or less severely, during the assault, despite the advantage they had of good cover. The

faces of all wore a shade of anxiety with the exception of the two scouts. Nothing could daunt them, although it was patent that a few more such victories would be equivalent to a defeat.

Warmed to the strife, Triplett declared that he would have a scalp, or lose his own in the attempt, and Gale, not to be outdone, volunteered to accompany him. Looking carefully to the priming of their rifles, they remounted and dashed from cover, directly toward the enemy. The latter stood for a moment in amazement at the daring thus displayed, then, as they comprehended their object, darted forward to frustrate it. Having a wholesome dread of the long rifles, they disappeared behind the bodies of their horses, showering bullets and arrows from under the animal's belly or neck.

The scouts paused for a moment, and with the whip-like crack of the rifles, one Indian dropped to the ground with a badly shattered knee, while a horse, with an almost human shriek of agony, reared up and fell heavily upon the form of its rider. Then each of the scouts stooped in their saddles and grasped the ankle of a dead savage; returned safely to the motte amid the showers of balls and hurtling arrows.

Hank coolly cut the feathered end from an arrow that had pierced his left arm, then pulling the barbed head through, he tightly bound a handkerchief around it. Gale had only received a slight flesh wound in the thigh, and doffing his old slouched hat, he exhibited a long blue welt upon the top of his head, where a bullet had "creased" him.

Fired by this bold act, and readily divining its meaning, a general charge was made by the savages. They started bold enough, but as they neared the line at which the deadly rifles would begin playing, their ardor sensibly cooled, and not over half a score dashed within range. Two rifles spoke first; the leaders fell from their horses. They, at least, would never tread the war-path. And the others, seeing for the first time how few their number was, turned and rode back to their more cowardly comrades.

All at once Zene Gale uttered a cry of surprise, and pointed to one of the dead men that had been brought in. While being dragged along the ground his shirt had been torn upon the breast. Through the rent gleamed the clear,

unstained skin of a white man! The paint and emblems upon his face were worn only as a disguise.

Upon examination the others also proved to be whites. The conclusion was easily arrived at. These men probably belonged to the band of the robber they were after. Most likely he had met them, and sent them on the watch, hoping thus to be freed from his pursuers. For it was not likely they would attack a party where they were certain to reap more hard blows than benefit, unless something unusual was in the wind.

Such was the fact, as we may as well state. They had instructions not to allow one man to escape to tell the fate of the others. All must be killed or taken prisoners.

The "prairie island" was not a large one. Thirty full strides would carry a man from one edge to the opposite. For a few feet on every side the grass extended into the *motte*. But the remainder was covered with a comparatively dense growth of underbrush. Near the center of the *motte* grew an immense tree, hung with grape-vines of a century's growth, surrounded by smaller ones.

As the outlaws had encircled their refuge, the whites were distributed in a like manner, while their horses were tethered near the center. Thus, should the besieged endeavor to cut their way through, and trust to the speed of their animals, three-fourths of the enemy could concentrate to repulse them.

A group of the besieged were gathered around the forms of the two outlaws when a report was heard, and one of their number, Jack Reynolds, gave a spasmodic bound and fell dead, shot through the brain. A curl of light-blue smoke arose slowly from the grass, at a point not fifty yards from the *motte*.

A couple of rifles were discharged at the point, but with no other result than eliciting derisive shouts. The brows of the whites clouded, for they fully realized the extent of their danger. It would be madness for them to rush out to avenge their comrade's death, for they knew not how many marksmen were concealed within the grass. And lives were precious, in a double sense, now. They might keep concealed behind the tree-trunks, but not for long, as the enemy must be watched, and then the concealed marksmen could shift their position until no person would be safe.

"Tarin' grizzlys, but this must be stopped! The question is, how?"

"Shin up a tree," laconically replied Triplett, with a nod toward the object mentioned.

"Gosh all hemlock, but ye're right, Hank," and without more ado, Gale and one other, with their rifles strapped upon their backs, began climbing up the huge tree above mentioned, aided in their ascent by the grape-vines.

This was not free from danger, but should their plans be discovered by those hidden in the grass, no efforts would be spared for putting a veto upon their project in the shape of a ragged bullet. But the surrounding trees screened them from view until the lower limbs were reached. From thence they selected their positions, each behind a good-sized limb, where they could command a fair view of the prairie. Then Gale gave a signal that all was ready.

During the tedious task of mounting the tree, those below had not been idle. A hunting-shirt had been doffed and the upper portion of it stuffed with grass. A piece of wood answered for a neck and head, upon which was placed a slouched hat. Then a rifle was discharged at the spot from whence the fatal shot had come, and when the smoke raised, the decoy was seen peering from behind the tree, as if to ascertain the result of its shot.

The counterfeit was good, and the bait took. A bullet was sent whizzing though the brain of the "man of straw," which was moved suddenly, then dropped to the ground, while Triplett uttered a wild cry that was echoed back from the outlaws, for they thought it was the death-shriek of one of their enemies.

Gale had his rifle poised, and as the smoke sailed away upon the fresh breeze, he saw the painted face of the troublesome marksman. Only for a moment, but that was sufficient, for the messenger of death hurtled through the air, and the outlaw fell forward, with a hole in his head other than those nature had placed there, dead.

A shout of exultation went up from those in the *motte* as Zene announced the result of his shot. A most dangerous enemy had been disposed of.

Perhaps an hour had transpired without any event occur-

ring to break the suspense of either party. Then Warren, the man who accompanied Gale, foolishly exposed himself as he was scrutinizing the prairie, and a bullet whizzed past his ear. He saw the curl of smoke, and in his eagerness to reply to the compliment, fully revealed the whole upper portion of his body.

It was a fatal act of carelessness to him, for another shot came from the same point, and, stricken even unto death, the unfortunate borderer sprung from his perch, and crashing through the branches, fell upon the ground, a mangled corpse.

But the author of his death did not have long to exult over his success, for a messenger of death visited him, and Zenas Gale had the blood of another human being upon his hand.

The other marksman, seeing the fate of his comrade, and dreading lest the same would be his, arose and fled with the speed of the startled deer. He was swift, but death was swifter, and he had not covered half a score yards before he fell, literally riddled with bullets, sent after him from the *motte*.

No further attempts were made, and when the sun was near the western horizon, Zenas Gale descended the tree and joined those below. He drew Hank Triplett, Wyvil Moss, and Floyd Spencer aside, and spoke :

" Kickin' mules, pardners! We're in a tight fix, shore. An' the question now is, how be we goin' to git out on't. Ef we stays hyar, they'll wipe us out, every doggoned one on us. Now I've thunk up a plan, an' ef you've no better, why we'll try ef we kin fool them fellers. Spittin' tomcat, yas!"

As no one spoke, he continued :

" Ye see, I thunk it all over, up yonder, an' reckon it'll work—cunnin' 'possums, I do! Now you kin see that ef we all stick thegither, that they'll wipe us out. Ef they don't, call me pore bull. So a leetle arter dark, Tripple an' me 'll mount an' make a dash through 'em, yellin' like mad an' a-shootin' enough fur a dozen. Ten to one the left on 'em 'll foller us; then you fellers must sep'rate an' slip past t'others, as best you kin. Then make fur whar we struck the river fust an' fine ag'in.

" Then you," turning to Moss, " must 'ither go to Fort Riley or Leavenworth an' git a troop o' sodgers, 'ither fur love

or money. Then mosey fur Briggs' Knob, an' light a big fire wi' green wood. On'y send one man to light the fire, an' let him kiver his trail. Then strike over to the 'Three Bro'hrs,' an' wait fur us. 'Twon't be long you'll hev to wait.

"Pardner an' me, ef we both git cl'ar, or ef one gits throwed, then the other, 'll hunt out what this Moore rendezvous at, an' the best way to clean 'em out. D'y'unnerstand?" concluded Gale.

"I like the plan, all but one part, and that is, I am going along with you instead of the others," declared Spencer.

"Wal," hesitated Gale, looking at Triplett, "ef so be as pard. here is agreeable, why I won't say no. Airthquakes an' hurricanes, younker, I freeze to you; ef I don't, chaw me!"

After some demurring from Moss, this plan was agreed upon, and the others informed of it. There were one or two young hot-heads, who were more than half in love with the fair Jessie, who wished to join the scouts upon their perilous mission, but this Gale would not allow.

When twilight deepened into night, the three men who were to draw off the outlaws, so as to afford their comrades a chance of escape, began their preparations. They were each furnished with another revolver in addition to their own, and every load was carefully examined. Their rifles were slung across their backs. They were not to be used; all was to depend upon the pistols, for their object was to make as much noise as possible. With a revolver in each hand, aided by good lungs, it was hoped the ruse would be successful, and the majority if not the whole of the outlaws thus be drawn off.

Did the trio escape the first volley, they had little fears for the rest. They knew the horses they rode, and felt assured that their equals were not to be found among the enemy. Hank Triplett on "Silver Heels," Gale with the horse he had confiscated at the time of the massacre on the Sweetwater, while Spencer was mounted on a magnificent blood-bay.

With the pressure of their comrades' hands still warm, and their fervent God-speed still ringing in their ears, the trio rode silently from the *motte* for some fifty yards; then, with wild yells they separated and darted over the prairie. A volley of rifle-balls was sent in the direction of their voices, and aiming

at the flashes, the scouts kept up a constant fusilade, hooting and yelling enough for a score.

The next few moments were full of anxious suspense to the party left behind in the wood. They did not know whether the ruse had succeeded or not. But they dared not wait longer, for it might be discovered at any moment, and thus few would live to tell the tale.

So they silently stole out upon the prairie, each going in a different direction, intending to meet at the ford. Bending low in their saddles to lessen the chances of discovery, they drew near the circle where the outlaws had been stationed.

Sandy McLean, the Scotchman, had chosen a course that ran at right angles to the one taken by the three scouts. He was but indifferently well mounted, and in addition to this his charger was a diminutive Mexican mule, as obstinate as they generally are, which is saying sufficient. He had but just passed the line, when the beast halted and set up a sonorous bray that could be heard a mile.

In vain Sandy spurred and kicked, he could not stop the music. The mule, with head and tail elevated, poured forth his serenade, the volume of sound amply testifying to the soundness of his lungs. Then Sandy heard an exclamation, followed by a bright flash and report, telling only too plainly that he was discovered. The shot was well aimed, and the mule, with a groan, fell upon its side, dead. Luckily McLean had freed his feet from the stirrup, and alighted safely. But he heard the tramp of a horse and saw an enemy coming at full speed toward him. Knowing that he would be discovered, did he try to flee, he dropped into the grass, drawing his pistol. Were he discovered, he would resist as well as he could, but if not, he would lie *perdu* until he could slip away unobserved.

The fact that his mule had been killed instantly proved the borderer's salvation, for it being small, as before stated, it was entirely concealed by the tall grass. The Scotchman's heart beat fast, for the outlaw was coming directly toward him, and not a dozen yards away. A couple more bounds, and Sandy rose to meet his foe, when the horse stumbled over the mule's body, casting the rider with violence over its head, and then stood still, trembling in every limb. The borderer did not

hesitate, but grasped the reins and leaped into the saddle, and dashed ahead in great glee at his providential escape.

Had he paused to examine the man whose place he had so unceremoniously taken, he would have found his neck was broken by the terrible fall, having alighted upon his head. Altogether, Sandy had no cause for complaint.

But some of his comrades were not so fortunate; for the shot that had put so summary an end to the mule's solo caused a general uproar upon the prairie. The ruse of Zeno Gale had not succeeded so completely as might have been desired, and a portion of the outlaws, suspecting something of the kind, still remained at their posts.

When the shot was fired, the whites, deeming themselves discovered, put spurs to their horses, not knowing but that the entire band were upon them. Thus they revealed their whereabouts, and the bullets began to whistle around them, but, owing to the darkness, with but slight effect. A few of them were overtaken and forced to a hand-to-hand combat, ending quite as often fatally to one side as the other. Fortunately, by far the greater number had followed the trio of scouts, else the little band of whites would have been annihilated.

The first volley fired by the outlaws at the scouts was harmless, as, in taking aim, they were only guided by the cries. But when this was answered, then they would fire at the flash. And the scouts owed their safety to one simple fact: the outlaws, in aiming, did not make allowance for the flight of their mark. Hence, with but few exceptions, their missiles passed *behind*, and did no injury. Only Floyd Spencer was wounded, and that but a ball-“crease.”

It was not long before the enemy discovered the trick that had been played upon them, and, as they were fast becoming distanced, they gave one last volley and hastened back to the *motte*, only to find that their expected prey had also escaped them.

CHAPTER V.

THE HILL HAUNT.

WHEN Jessie was lifted into the saddle and realized the full force of the words spoken to Toulmin (to give the outlaw his latest name), when Spencer so unexpectedly appeared, her brain reeled and she fainted. At first Toulmin was rather pleased than otherwise, as it would render her less troublesome. But as mile after mile was traversed, and the maiden's consciousness did not return, he grew alarmed and feared lest the sudden shock had in reality killed her.

He hastily drew a flask of whisky from an inner pocket, and removing the stopper, was about to administer a portion, when his horse stumbled, falling to his knees, having stepped into the burrow of some animal that was concealed in the tall grass. Nothing was injured but the flask of liquor; that was shattered as it fell from the robber's hand, and its contents spilled. With an imprecation Toulmin urged his horse onward, for he knew that he must soon obtain water, or his captive would perish after all.

In a few minutes a small creek was reached, and riding into it, Toulmin gathered water in the hollow of his hand, and dashed it into Jessie's face. This he repeated until, with a gasp, she opened her eyes, and, with a wondering voice, asked where she was. But she needed not an answer, for the terrible truth flashed across her mind.

She saw it all then—how the man she had so dearly loved was in reality the demon he had been painted—the robber chief, a murderer, a black-hearted renegade to his race; a foul blot upon the face of the earth! Instead of denying the fact when accused of it by Spencer, he had convicted himself by his own words. And this was the man she had deemed all that was good and noble—to whom she had plighted her troth!

Her proud spirit was fully aroused, and turning her head so she could look her captor fairly in the face, she demanded:

"What is the meaning of this outrage, sir?"

"The meaning, pet, is easily explained. We are only taking our wedding tour *before*, instead of *after* the ceremony," laughed Toulmin. "Do not fear, my darling; this is but a rough way of wooing; still, I will not make you the worse husband for that," and he stooped to press a kiss upon her lips.

Jessie's dark eyes flashed, and, almost beside herself with anger, she struck her abductor across his face with her hand, each finger leaving a livid mark that soon changed to purple.

"Cowardly villain!—murderer!—you now wear your true colors and I see you for what you really are. But do not think you will triumph long. *Men* will follow your trail and hunt you out, no matter what—"

"Really, Miss Moss, you are quite an orator. We will have you haranguing my band ere long. But to be candid, I am glad you say just what you think. I shall have the less delicacy in explaining my purpose;" then changing his ironical tone for a sharp, decisive one, he continued :

"You thought we met for the first time when I killed the panther, but you were in error. I had often met and visited you while in New York. You look surprised, yet nevertheless 'tis true. I was Warne McIntyre. I loved you from the first with all the fervor of a man's first deep love, and I told you as much. You rejected my suit—indeed, you were but a school-girl then—yet in such a manner that I did not despair. Then you left the city. For two years I could not find where you spent your summers. Then, having found it necessary to leave New York very suddenly, I accidentally followed you to where you had removed, and to my great joy, as well as surprise, found that you were a close neighbor of mine. For I frankly admit I am the leader of a band of—robbers, as you would term them. 'Road Agents' sounds far more pleasantly in my ears.

"Well, I thought I would try my luck once more, under the *nom de guerre* of Captain Hart Toulmin, and you are aware of the result. Had not that fool lived when he should have been dead with the rest, my plans would not have been changed. Still, it is only a little more trouble, the result will be just the same."

" You may not be aware of the fact, but you are the heiress of immense wealth. I have said that I love you. So I do, fervently, but, rest assured, that were you a penniless girl, I should never have mentioned or thought of the word marriage in connection with your name. But you would have been mine all the same. With this fortune I can 'retire from public life,' and on the continent I can live the life I was intended for.

" Your father has the power of willing it away, you will say. But he will not have the chance. If he proves obstinate, *an Indian raid*, a little powder, lead and fire, will settle the entire matter, and Ireton be only one more border town the less. You may say that the marriage will not be legal without your consent, and that will never be given. Pardon, if I contradict you. That also can be provided for. Two persons can be abducted as well as one, and when you see the loved forms of your parents writhing at the torture-stake, I think you will condescend to speak that little word, *yes*. Do you understand me?" he uttered, in a smooth, oily tone, then resumed:

" I say, when you see your aged parents writhe, and hear their groans and shrieks when their finger-nails are torn off; when the skin yields before the red-hot point of a knife, and is torn off in strips with the bullet-molds fresh from the fire; when you see the splinters, soaked in fat, thrust into their limbs and then set on fire; when you see this, I say, and other modes of torturing equally as pleasant, I do not think you will hesitate long before you say the little word that gives me a lovely bride and a king's treasure," concluded the monster, as he drew rein and checked his horse down to a walk.

Jessie did not reply; she could not. She feared to trust her tongue to utter the words that almost choked her, lest she should anger her relentless captor so greatly that he would forget his plans and sacrifice her then and there. She had ceased to struggle; it was useless. But she did not despair and her brain was busy. She felt assured that her friends, informed by Spencer, had taken the trail, and thought they could not be far behind. She lay passively, but her half closed eyes noted every object upon the route.

It was after sundown when they reached the river so often

alluded to, and Toulmin halted upon its bank, both to rest the horse and appease his own hunger. Jessie accepted the cold meat and corn-cake that he offered her, for she felt the need of something to sustain her strength.

She saw that he did not intend to pause long, for the accoutrements were left on the horse as he eagerly cropped the rich, juicy grass that plentifully bordered the stream. As Jessie dispatched her homely food, her eyes were fixed upon the beautiful form of the iron-gray steed, and then a wild hope flashed across her mind, but she concealed the convulsive start she had given by turning half-way around and glancing at the outlaw. He was reclining upon his back, with his gaze bent upon the sky overhead, and placidly smoking a pipe. But she saw that her movement had caught his ear, and that he was listening intently.

What had given birth to the hope—a wild, chimerical one, yet still a *hope*—was this: The horse was not tethered, being too well trained to stray, and, in feeding, had entered a hollow, a depression in the prairie. This ran but a short distance, then sloped to the common level. The animal was now standing close to one side of this, so that his back was not more than a foot and a half above the edge. The saddle and bridle still remained in place, with the exception of the bit. That was hanging from its mouth, so as to allow the horse to eat freely.

What was to prevent her from mounting him and fleeing? To be sure a bullet sped faster than a horse, but would he shoot? She did not know, but resolved to risk it. She could but meet death, and to remain as she was, in the power of him who had so coolly acknowledged he was a robber and murderer, was infinitely worse.

Fearing to lose a moment, she turned quickly around, and as if by accident, knocked over the tin cup of water that stood near by. With an exclamation of impatience she picked up the cup, and rose to her feet. Toulmin raised himself up on one elbow, and asked her what she wanted.

“A drink of water; this is all gone.”

“I will get it for you,” he replied, laying down his pipe.

“Thank you; I prefer waiting upon myself,” and she hastened down to the shore, where she took a hearty draught.

Then stooping, she began to wash her hands and face, but it was done in order that she might see what Toulmin was doing, and to gain time. He had sunk back upon his elbow and began filling his pipe, but with his gaze fixed upon Jessie. Another glance showed her that the horse was in a favorable position.

She dared not linger longer; so, refilling the cup, she slowly started back, gradually edging nearer the horse. Then dropping the cup she sprung upon his back, and striking him violently with the long reins, darted away upon the back-trail like an arrow.

The outlaw seized his rifle and half leveled it, but then dropping the weapon he caught up the ivory whistle that hung around his neck, and blew a long, shrill blast.

Jessie was urging on her iron-gray, and had begun to think her escape was assured, but when the sound of the call was heard, the horse turned with a wild neigh and sped back toward its master, despite all her efforts to the contrary. Finding that she could not turn or check him, Jessie threw herself from the saddle. Luckily the grass was high and dense, and she escaped injury, but as she regained her feet and turned to fly, a strong hand was placed upon her shoulder, and she was once more a captive.

Toulmin did not utter a word, but led her back to where the horse was standing, and then mounted, lifting her before him. He entered the water a few paces, then heading up stream, suffered the animal to pick his own way. They rode onward in silence for several miles, until they reached a point opposite the timber that the outlaws and their Indian allies used as a covert the succeeding day, from which they dashed out upon the little band of whites, as already narrated. Then Toulmin guided his horse from the water and rode into the wood, until he found a spot that suited his fancy, when he dismounted.

His preparations for encamping were simple. He first drew a coil of strong cord from the saddle-bags attached to his saddle, and approaching Jessie, said, in a cold tone:

"I regret exceedingly that I am obliged to bind you for the night, but you have proven yourself to be such a prompt and wide-awake person, that I have no other resource. I am too

much fatigued to keep watch over you all night, and besides I believe we decided to dispense with ceremonies. So hold out your hands."

Under this new ignominy Jessie nearly broke down, but calling to her aid her womanly pride, she silently obeyed the order. The same thing was done to her feet, and then Toulmin left her, to attend to his horse. Tying him near by, the outlaw cut a quantity of tender boughs for him to eat, removing the saddle, but leaving the bridle in place, excepting the bits.

Then returning, he tossed a blanket over Jessie, and securing the loose ends of the two cords to his arm, laid down and soon went to sleep.

Jessie passed a miserable, sleepless night, for the cords had been drawn so tightly as to stop the circulation of blood in her limbs, but her pride and hate would not allow her to awaken Toulmin, although, by so doing, this would have been remedied. It was a long, long night to her, and when day dawned she hailed the change with a feeling of relief.

In a short time they were again *en route*, and several miles were passed over in comparative silence. Then Toulmin suddenly drew rein and halted. Far ahead of them was a large body of horsemen, and from their course it was plain they would not pass far from where he then stood.

Dismounting, he caused both horse and captive to kneel down where the grass would cover them. But his precaution was needless, for as they drew nearer he recognized a portion of his own band, and remounting, spurred toward the party.

As he met them they uttered three hearty cheers, thus betraying what they really were, instead of what they seemed, for no Indian ever emitted the hoarse, wild "whooray" that rung upon the air. Still, there were a few Cheyennes among the band. The true savage sat in silence.

Toulmin directed them to ambush in the grove of trees where he had passed the night, and upon no account to allow the pursuers to escape them. And had they followed his directions, remaining within cover of the trees, and allowed the whites to follow the trail as it led from the river to the *motte*, not one of the party would have escaped death or capture. What the result was we have already seen.

Then the outlaw and his captive rode on at a steady trot, and in due course of time the Black Hills were seen in the distance. These do not derive their name from any unusual peculiarity in the nature and color of the soil, as might be imagined, but because they are covered with a dense growth of stunted, dark-green cedars, which, at a distance, appear black. Hence the name, "Black Hills."

As they rode along, Toulmin pointed out several objects of interest, either for their curious formation or the legends attached to them, and in the distance, a chain of the Rocky Mountains. Then leaving the prairie, they entered a narrow defile, the walls of which were nearly perpendicular, and a thousand feet high. Toulmin explained to Jessie that this was the chief trail that led to the robbers' stronghold, and that when danger from this direction was apprehended, men were stationed upon either side of the bluff, with enormous stones to roll down upon the heads of those who strove to enter.

After some time spent in winding through the defiles and crossing ridges, in such a zigzag manner that Jessie, who had endeavored to remember every landmark and turn, grew bewildered and gave up the attempt in despair, Toulmin drew rein at some little distance from a towering rock which appeared to entirely bar the way.

Then he uttered the shrill chatter of a red fox-squirrel, closely followed by the piercing scream of the black hawk. In a moment the yelping bark of the coyote came in reply, and then the outlaw leader blew a peculiar quavering blast upon his whistle; when a rough, dirty-looking man stepped out from the rock and advanced to take the horse.

From the rock, we said, and literally he did so. There had been a small hole in the lower portion of it, which had been enlarged by the Road Agents to the size of a common door, leading into a spacious cavern with a dozen or more apartments, fashioned by the hand of Nature. To screen this from idle eyes, a door had been manufactured from board and canvas, painted and covered with fine sand, and so fitted into the aperture that the uninitiated eye would fail to discover the entrance, unless suspicion were aroused and the face of the rock sounded.

But a guard was posted at the entrance night and day, and

from minute holes in the door, commanded a fair view of the defile for some distance. Unless a person, in approaching, paused *beyond* a certain point, and correctly gave the signals, he was to be treated as an enemy. If more than one, notice was to be given to that portion of the band within, and such measures taken as were most beneficial to the band in general. Owing to these precautions, the secret of the cave had never been discovered, or at least was never divulged.

Carefully lifting the screen, Toulmin entered, leading Jessie. The darkness was intense, contrasted with the clear sunlight they had just left, and Jessie shrunk back, with the dread common in such cases; the fear of coming in violent contact with some hard obstacle. But Toulmin appeared well acquainted with the *locale*, and led the way without hesitation.

After several abrupt turns, and having apparently traversed a considerable distance, they beheld a faint light, and the sound of many voices in revelry. A few moments brought them to the edge of a large apartment, and Toulmin signed for Jessie to observe the picture before her.

It was a wild, picturesque scene that she beheld as her eyes grew accustomed to the light. Extending the entire length of the room were two rough tables that fairly groaned beneath the articles piled upon them. The viands were in profusion, although the meal was nearly finished. The service was motley and varied—wooden, pewter, delf and china ware, interspersed with an occasional piece of silver, standing before some bandit who loved display better than the money the bullion would bring were it melted and sold.

But Jessie's eyes did not linger upon these things. Around the table were seated men and women, laughing, singing, eating and carousing. Women in form, but ah, what were they in disposition and heart?

And yet they had been, some of them at least, as pure and innocent as the one who now stood observing them. Some had married the man of their choice, only to be dragged down to his degraded level. Others had not that excuse or consolation. They were the victims of some border raid, or a night attack upon some emigrant-train, then conveyed here. The result was but natural. They plunged into every excess, and rushed to strong drink to drown memory.

And not a few of them had become more corrupt if possible than the men. When a new captive was brought in, they could not rest until she was down to their own low depth.

Reader, this is not a picture of a distorted imagination ; it is drawn from life. The characters given are real, and I "nothing extenuate, naught set down in malice."

The apartment was lighted with lamps filled with the fat of wild game, suspended from the rough uneven ceiling, or set upon some projecting ledge of the sides. The walls were nearly concealed by disguises and garments of every size and shape, while weapons, and other more peaceful implements were hanging here and there. Rifles and muskets, spears, bows and arrows were stacked along the base, while in one corner were huge piles of skins and furs.

Near these were seated a number of women, whose dusky skin and humble demeanor proclaimed them Indians. Their lords and masters were gathered near the end of the table, while the fire-water received their undivided attention.

It was a wild, startling scene, and Toulmin felt the hand that he still clasped tremble and grow cold. He was about to step forth into the room, when the sound of loud, excited words at the opposite end arrested his attention, and he turned just in time to see a huge knife as it gleamed in the light, and descending, was buried to the hilt in an Indian's throat.

He darted forward before the burly Russian who still clasped the weapon, withdrew it, or the murdered man's comrade should avenge him, and stood before the culprit, who trembled and turned ashy pale before his commander.

"Harmon Muskau, what is the meaning of this? Have you forgotten the laws of the band, or are you tired of life that you draw blood within the cave?"

"It pees hees vault. He delled me I vos a tammed lie!" growled the outlaw.

"No matter. You have broken the law and must pay the penalty. Are you ready?" coldly answered Toulmin, drawing a revolver and cocking it.

The man trembled and glanced around him. He could see no hope of escape.

"Yaw den, I pees reaty. Shoot!" he cried, and drawing himself up, looked his leader boldly in the face.

"I hate to do it, Muskau, but the rules must be kept. You are a brave man, and none better when you let liquor alone. But you must die. If I didn't punish you the Indians would and that would be the means of breaking up the entire band," and the deadly revolver was slowly leveled.

Not a feature moved or a nerve quivered as the man stared full into the dark tube that was to send him all unprepared and with a heavy black load of sins upon his soul, before his Creator. Then the trigger was drawn, the bullet crashed through his brain, and without a moan or gasp the breathless clay fell forward at the feet of his leader and slayer.

Coldly ordering two of the men to remove the body, Toulmin returned to where the horror-stricken Jessie stood, and without a word led her through the apartment, taking a lamp to light the way. Passing through two smaller rooms, he paused before a strong door, made from thick oaken slabs, and hung upon heavy iron hinges. This he opened with a key taken from an inner pocket and motioned his captive to enter.

As she did so, he told her that she should not be disturbed until morning, and that she would find the necessary toilet articles, as well as refreshments within. Then the huge door closed with a clang, and she heard the key first turned, then withdrawn, and the echoing sound of his footsteps as the outlaw leader returned the way he had come.

CHAPTER VI.

"BLACK JIM."

SEVERAL days after the events just recorded, the outlaw leader mounted his horse, "Storm Cloud," as a fanciful Indian belonging to the band had named the noble iron-gray, and rode through the defile, out upon the prairie. He was ill at ease, and had good cause for so being.

The band he had left to capture the whites who were in pursuit of him, had returned unsuccessful, and with nearly one-third of their number either killed or disabled, while the

whites had escaped. Then he had learned that Wyvil Moss had visited Fort Riley, going from thence to Fort Leavenworth, on a mission easily divined. These facts, joined to a growing dissatisfaction among his men, caused the dark scowl that rested upon his features.

He rode listlessly along, apparently without aim or object, allowing his horse to choose its own course. But he was destined to be rudely awakened, for, as his horse drew near a clump of wild sage, that stood a short distance from a good-sized *motte*, the dark form of a man sprung from the covert and yelled :

"Hol' on dar, you mister seller ; jest stop right whar you is. 'Fore de Lord, if you don't, I'll pull de snapper on ye. I ain't a-foolin' now ; I will so' suah."

Toulmin was taken by surprise, for his thoughts were far away ; still he was not alarmed. His heart did not beat the faster or his bronzed cheek blanch. He had too often met death at arm's length and come off the victor, for that. But he obeyed the command, or, rather, the horse stopped of its own accord.

His eyes swept over the person who had thus challenged him. As the speech declared, it was a negro, or more like a three-quarter blood. His features were rather well formed and not of the exaggerated type, and his skin shone a rich nut-brown through the rents in his garments. An old slouched hat was pushed back from his face, revealing a crop of black, close-curling hair that adorned his occiput. In the belt at his waist were stuck a long knife and a couple of valuable revolvers. In his hands, and leveled full at the head of the outlaw, was a heavy rifle of medium caliber.

"Git off 'm dat ar' hoss, I tol' ye, 'less I blow a hole fr^u ye quicker'n lightnin,'" reiterated the darky.

"Why, what do you want with my horse?" queried Toulmin, to gain time, as he planned how to dispose of this troublesome customer.

"Yah ! yah ! yah ! I guess dat hoss dar b'long to dis nigger now ; *I foun' 'im*," laughed the black.

"Found him with me on his back?" at the same time loosening his revolver in the right hand holster.

"Yeh. S'pose I done foun' 'em both. Take de animile

let you go ef you don't make a fuss. Ef ye do, den—I tol' ye git down from dat ar' horse! Git down double-quick. I's got de ager in my fo'finger an' it'll git ter shakin' purty soon. Has de cramp like, ye see," he added, squinting along the leveled rifle.

"Why, you fool, there's no cap on your gun!" cried Toulmin, drawing his revolver; and, as the black lowered the muzzle to examine the tube, the outlaw spurred to his side, and thrusting the muzzle of his pistol under the negro's nose, laughed:

"Who's got the trumps now, woolly, I'd like to know? The next time a man tells you there's no cap on your rifle, pull the trigger, anyhow. You'll find out as quick that way."

The negro stared in amazement for a moment, then dropping his rifle and falling upon his knees, he clasped his hands and begged for mercy.

"Fo' de Lord's sake, mas'r, don't kill de poor ole nigger, please don't! He's on'y jest a-funnin', he war; didn't mean nuffin. Jes' wanted to see how brave ye war. I'll sw'ar dat's all; I'll take my solumcholly oaf on a stack o' rismeticks as high 's a bean-pole, dat's all. Don't kill me, an' I'll be yer sarvint fer ebber an' ebber. I'll cook fer ye, do any t'ing, ef ye'll on'y jes' let me lib a leetle 'ile longer," pleaded the darky, as he dodged his head first from one side to the other then reversing the motion, trying to avoid the hollow tube that followed every movement, and looking so ludicrously terrified that Toulmin could not restrain a laugh.

"But tell me what you were up to; what you stopped me for," he said.

"Won't ye git mad ef I tol' ye?" hesitated the darky.

"Mad? No, but I will unless you tell a straight story."

"Well, den, I'll tol' ye all how it comed about," replied the darky. "Ye see, ole Mas'r Whitehead, dat ownded me, he goes out to Californy an' tuck me 'long wid him. He gub me wages, an' we dug lots an' lots o' yaller stuff 'at he said was gold. Arter he got all he wanted we started 'long o' a wagin-train fer hum."

"Free or four days ago we left de train an' struck on ahead, so's to git dar sooner. Now, I bin t'inkin' a heap 'bout dat ar' money, I hed, an' mas'r he made it wusser, 'case he kep'

a-talkin' all de time 'bout how he'd splurge out on dem ar' piles o' dust, when he done got hum. An' what hosses, an' hounds, an' fightin' roosters he'd buy; an' how he'd git drunk ebry day an' night too, an' how many niggers he'd hev, an' sich like, till it 'peared like I'd go crazy.

"Den one time I t'ought as I'd digged most ob de gol' dat Le'd set me free when we done got hum. An' so I up an' axed him, w'u'd he? Lord, ye'd jest orter heerd him cuss t' Clare to Moses, ef he didn't make de a'r smell ob sulphur an' brimstone, he sw'ared so orful. Den he knocked me off ob de hoss, he did. But he didn't do it ag'in. 'Ca'se why? I up an' blowed de hull top o' his head off, I did, dat same night.

"Den I hid his body, shot his hoss, an' left like de debble was arter me," hissed the negro, his eyes glowing like fire-balls, and a fierce scowl distorting his features.

"But where is your horse now, and why did you stop me?" asked Toulmin.

"De hoss frowed me yes'day," continued the negro, "an' got cl'ar off. Den I kept on walkin' an' walkin' till I done got hyar; den I slepted las' night ober dar," motioning toward the *motte*. "I see'd ye a-comin', an' dat ye had a mighty fine hoss, so I t'ought dat I'd borry it fer a leetle w'ile," mumbled the darky, as if fearful of giving offense.

"But where is the gold?—have you got it about you?" queried Toulmin, in a careless tone.

"No, sah; I done hid dat whar no pusson 'cept dis chile hisself kin fin' it," replied the darky, with a cunning leer.

"Never mind that now. Where were you going if you had got my h'orse?"

"Fer de States."

"Why, you fool, you would be suspected and hung in less than a week! No; you come with me. I'll show you some fun, and where you can either make or spend money as fast as you please. If you go to the cities, you'll be hung, so your only chance is to join my band. We make our own laws, and the hangin' is all on the other side. We have plenty to eat, drink, and little to do. Money is like water with us. And there are women, too; black, red, or white, just as you prefer. What do you say?—will you join us?"

"Ain't ye jest a-foolin' dis chile, now?" queried the negro.

"No, I am in earnest and mean just what I say."

"Den I's wid ye. I'll jine ye an' t'ank ye in de barg'in," was the eager reply.

"It's fortunate for you that you do. Had you said *no*, you'd not be alive now," laughed the outlaw. "Well, ebony—by the way, what is your name?"

"Sim—Samuel, sah; dat's all."

"Well, Sim, are you known to anybody in Ireton?"

"Wha's dat—eat'n what?" asked Sim.

"Never mind, but you'll do. Come with me," and he turned his horse's head toward the cave, closely followed by Sim.

The latter appeared to be a very clumsy person indeed, if we may judge from his actions. First he stumbled and knocked off his hat, then picked it up, dropped it once more, and ended by pulling it far down over his eyes.

Toulmin appeared to fully trust the negro, and openly led the way to the entrance of the concealed cave, after giving the necessary signals. The door closed behind them, and neither reappeared throughout the day.

On the succeeding day, however, about noon, the negro stepped from the cave, and threading the intricate path with a readiness that proved how thoroughly he must have noted the windings on the one occasion he had traversed it, followed the trail left by the robber captain and himself on the preceding day.

As he neared the *motte*, he paused and imitated the quavering caw of the rain-crow, then listened intently. The shrill, piercing whistle of the "Big Hawk" echoed through the woods.

As if relieved from some anxiety, the darky glided forward and entered the "prairie island." In a few moments he was met by two white men, and then the trio plunged deeper into the woods.

The latter were old Hank Triplett and Floyd Spencer, while the "negro," as the reader has doubtless suspected, was the guide, Zenas Gale.

As they seated themselves upon the trunk of a fallen tree, Spencer spoke:

ACTING THE JAILER.

"Well, Zene, what have you found out—what success? Have you seen Miss Jessie?"

"Gobblin' turkeys! I've found out a heap; ef I hain't, call me a mole! Ye kin brag high onto *that* hand, ye kin, an' pull in the chips like sun, *I* tell ye! Waghs!" returned the guide, excitedly.

"Squakin' cranes!" continued he. "I've pulled the wool over Snakey's eyes, jined his band; found out the signs an' signals to enter the hole; counted his men an' 'zamined hi weapons; tasted his whisky, an' bove all see'd Miss Jessie, leastways torked to her."

"You did?" exclaimed Spencer. "Is she well and safe? What did she say?"

"Jumpin' jackrabbits, man, you're wusser'n a Pinto squaw, you is, an' that's needless. 'Case why? her tongue's tied in the middle an' runs at both eends! I couldn't answer all them thar an' git through by sun-up. Wal," he added, "let me start at the nigh eend o' the trail, an' I'll foller it cl'ar up.

"Ye see'd how I bamboozled the polecat yender, an' got 'im to let me jine his band. So, he takes me to the all-fired-est, cutest hole-in-the wall that I ever see'd, an' introduced me to his fellers as one o' them. They didn't see through the walnut stain no more'n he did, 'at I've got on my hide.

"Then he tried to pump me, an' I answered so's to please him mightily, tellin' more lies inside o' thet hour 'n I kin answer fer if I live a hunderd y'ars.

"He see'd, or thort he did, which 'mounted to the same thing, that I war jist the feller he wanted, an' then he let me inter a secret. 'Pears like thar's another feller as wants to be kyaptain, an' the band's 'bout evenly divided. Then this 'ere feller see'd Miss Jessie, an' tuck a hankerin' arter her too. This mixed things up pooty consid'able, ye see; trappin' beavers yas!"

"So he offers me big pay ef I'd keep good guard onto the door o' a room whar he'd got a gal pris'ner. Slidin' minks, didn't my gizzard jump cl'ar up inter my throat? Ef it didn't, call me a musquash; waghs! Didn't I say yes powerful quick? Oh no, I guess not!"

"Wal, he showed me the raange, an' afore he shut the door I saw'd Miss Jessie; an' arter he'd gone I told her to puckles

up ; thet fri'nds war nigh an' w'u'd free her 'fore long. It 'peared like she'd go crazy she war so glad, an' I trimbled fer fear some pusson 'd h'ar her. But she kinder simmered down, an' then I tol' her all thet hed happined sence she war tuck, by whisperin' through the keyhole, an' how, jest as soon as her dad got hyar with men, we'd take the shebang," concluded Gale.

"But *can* it be taken?" asked Floyd.

"Crickets an' hoppergrasses, yas," replied Zene. "We'll jist wait ontell thar's nobody in the pass, then the men kin stay back o' the bend, out o' sight, wile two or three gi'n the signal, an' w'en the door is opened, they kin grup those on guard. A knife-thrust ends them. Then the rest is easy. Fer most o' the Agents git drunk every night, or purty n'arly so."

"How did you manage to get off to-day, Gale? Won't he suspect you?"

"Nary suspect! Ye see I watch at night an' am off in the daytime. Then I told him I'd like to go an' git the gold I'd hid—what I took from my mas'r when I rubbed him out, ye know," laughed the scout. "When I go back I'll tell him I kudn't find it; then I'll hev a good excuse fer meetin' ye ag'in afore long. D'ye unnerstan'?"

As Gale did not wish to go back to the cave before night, so as to be able to tell a plausible tale about his vain search for the hidden treasure, they lighted their pipes, and prepared to pass the intervening hours as pleasantly as possible.

CHAPTER III.

"FROM THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE."

MATTERS were, as Zene Gale had expressed it, considerably mixed up at the cave. There was one man, a wild, reckless, dare-devil young fellow, named Wolfe Eyre, or, as it was rendered by his comrades, "Wolf Eye," who had risen to be second in command. But with this he was not content. In

ordinately ambitious, he possessed qualities that, had he followed politics in a wider sphere, would have insured him success. But he preferred being a robber in name as well as reality.

Thus, by flattery each man's peculiar hobby, he succeeded in becoming a great favorite with the majority. And now he had come out openly and demanded a new election. In this he was supported by his partisans.

Still, Toulmin had his staunch friends, generally the older and more experienced "Agents," and sought to temporize. He was playing for a high stake, and that won, he was ready to abdicate. But, until it was, he must retain his position, for well he knew that did his rival supplant him, the next step would be to appropriate the fair captive.

Thus the outlaw leader was inclined to rush matters, and Jessie, when she learned from Zene Gale the state of affairs, was greatly alarmed. It had been determined that no attempt at escape should be made until the time the cave was to be attacked; but this altered matters, and they feared that Toulmin would contrive some plan for the removal of the captive to a more secure place. At length the time came.

Toulmin had departed the evening before, not intending to return before noon of the succeeding day, and as he thoroughly trusted the seeming negro, had given him the key of the prison, so that he could supply the wants of the captive; and they had determined to take advantage of this fact.

Early that morning, before daylight, Jessie robed herself in the dress of an Indian squaw that Gale had procured, and with a large blanket shrouding her form as well as features, she followed the scout from her prison.

Gale strode on boldly, closely followed by his trembling companion, and they reached the cave entrance with no further interruption than a few rude jests, that were answered by a sly wink from the disguised scout. The door was opened for them by the guard, as the darky slipped a gold-piece into his hand, telling him not to tell any person where they had gone.

Once out of sight, the fugitives quickened their steps, and hastened toward the *motte* where the two scouts were concealed. These were already informed of the contemplated escape, as

Gale had left a horse in their charge for the use of Jessie. Spencer and Triplett were not to accompany them, as it was necessary some one should remain behind to acquaint the party under Wyvil Moss of the cave's situation.

Gale had conducted Triplett to the point from whence he could see the entrance, one night, and Floyd stayed from choice. Until the slayer of his kindred should meet his merited fate, there was scant room in his heart for aught else.

With a few hasty instructions and words of parting, the scout led the way from the grove, and the fugitives set their faces toward Fort Riley. Gale feared to return direct to Ireton, for he knew that the pursuit would be hot and heavy, and that the village would be the first point aimed for, as he did not fear that their trail would be followed, for the prairie was covered with intersecting tracks, of every grade of freshness.

His principal, and, indeed, only fear was, that they might chance upon some roving band of either Indians, or of those belonging to the band of which he was considered a worthy member. In the latter case he knew that his treachery would be speedily exposed, and then his life would not be worth an hour's purchase.

But, his was not a nature given to gloomy thoughts, and banishing them from his mind, he rattled on in a strain peculiar to himself, in order to allay the misgivings that he knew Jessie could but entertain. Still, he was none the less watchful, and keenly scrutinized the prairie in every direction, but not a living person did they see, and when the sun told the noon hour, they paused by the side of a well-wooded stream, and were soon busily engaged in discussing the cold venison and corn-cakes that Gale had provided from the robbers' larder.

Their horses had been hardly pressed, and Gale knew they must be allowed at least an hour's rest and feed, if they did not want to be left afoot, or ride broken-down horses. The heat was intense, and they had maintained a swift gallop since daylight, in their eagerness to leave the cave far behind them. For the fact of their escape could not long remain undiscovered, and then would come swift and hot pursuit.

Then the horses were again mounted, and the journey resumed. But less conversation was had now, for they were

both busy with their own thoughts. Jessie was pondering over her one-time lover's baseness, while Gale was equally absorbed.

Two hours had passed since leaving the creek where they had rested, and the gallop had not been broken save for a few minutes at a time. As they rose over a high ridge in the prairie, Gale uttered a curse at his own stupidity, and hastily retreated. But the mischief was done, and he could hear the faint chorus of yells that rose upon the air.

What he had seen was a considerable body of Indians, who were riding slowly toward the fugitives as they crossed the ridge. That he had been seen, he knew full well; the yells told him that, and that there was but one hope of escape.

Perhaps the savages' horses were wearied also, and would not be able to overtake him. If the chase could be protracted until night, he felt assured that he could mislead them in the darkness.

These revelations flashed through his mind in a moment, as he caught the reins of the horse ridden by Jessie, and turning to the right, urged them forward at the top of their speed. They were both noble brutes, as had been pretty well tested, but Gale knew they could not keep up their present rate of speed for many more miles; but his object was to test the freshness and quality of the horses in pursuit before he revealed his own weakness by slackening up.

He had nearly two miles the start, and unless the horses in pursuit were comparatively fresh, he thought he could stay them off until night.

He was doomed to disappointment, however, for, as the Indians crossed the ridge, he could note the long, springing leaps, the swift, regular strokes that told of unwearied limbs. With a low but none the less bitter curse, the scout urged on their jaded horses.

He glanced ahead and saw no hope there. A deep scowl contracted his features, and he appeared revolving some plot in his mind. Then he spoke to Jessie.

"Jest look ahind ye, ma'am, an' see how fast them impes are overhaulin' us. Our horses ar' purty nigh played, while thar'n is fresh as a daisy. They cain't help but catch us afore long, an—" hesitatingly said Gale.

"Speak out plainly, Mr. Gale," interrupted Jessie, seeing the worthy guide's dilemma.

"Wal, I *war* kinder fear'd thet you'd 'ither think I'd gone clean crazy, else j'ined them thar purps. Wimmen is mighty queer critters anyhow," apologized the scout. "What I meant was jest this. To pull up an' s'render 'thout any more fuss. They'll be easier on us then, an' p'r'aps we kin manage to bamboozle 'em some way, an' gi'n 'em the slip after all. But it's jest as you say, yes or no. They'll hev us, anyhow," concluded the scout.

"Follow the course you deem best," replied Jessie, while a cold thrill of horror and despair crept over her as she heard the blood-curdling yells of the savages who were gaining on them hand over hand.

The guide did not hesitate, but checking his horse he rode slowly back toward the enemy. A murmur of surprise ran from mouth to mouth as they beheld this action, and they pulled up their horses, while several of their braves stood erect upon their backs and keenly scrutinized the prairie beyond. Then, as if satisfied, they again advanced, and the next moment the fugitives were inclosed within a dusky circle of paint-bedaubed Sioux.

The disguised scout was treated with far more consideration than would have been shown him had his skin been its natural color, for the red-men, knowing how the negro is down-trodden (apparently) by the whites, feel a natural sympathy for them. And in their hands, at least, it is better to be black than white.

His arms were taken from him, but he was not bound, the circle of braves being deemed sufficient security for his good behavior.

Just before sunset a *motte* was reached by the side of a small creek, and preparations were begun for encamping. Several of the braves were dispatched in quest of game, while the others kindled several fires and secured their horses where they could obtain plenty of food, the rich, succulent grass being plentiful along the creek.

Gale waited in considerable anxiety to see in what manner the savages would secure their prisoners for the night. For prisoners they were, he felt assured, although they were seen

ingly free and unrestrained. He had determined to escape during the night, if possible; for every yard traversed by them with the red-skins was so much out of their way, and would have to be retraced before they were in security.

The guide keenly noted the manner and exact place where the horses were staked out, and more particularly the two that he had mentally decided were the best. On the back of these he knew that they would be safe from pursuit the moment they were out of rifle range.

The hunters soon returned, having been successful in luring a herd of antelope within range, and then securing four. Gale partook heartily of the tender, juicy meat and Jessie did the same on a hint from him that she would require all her strength and energy before morning.

At length the savages began to think of sleep, and while some half-dozen rolled themselves up in their blankets and stretched themselves out, others, among whom was Fox-Eye, the Chippewa-Sioux, consulted together in low tones. But, although Gale could not catch a word, he was confident that they were discussing what disposition should be made of his companion and himself.

This was apparently settled, for the chief arose, and spreading a couple of blankets upon the ground, near the fire, informed Jessie that she was to rest there. At a slight nod from Zene, she took her place, and half-reclining, drew one blanket over her to shield her form from the heavy night-dews. Then Gale took his position near her, trembling lest he should not be allowed the use of his limbs. But he was not disturbed.

A number of the Sioux went out to see if their horses were secure, while the others lay down to sleep, in which they were joined by the rest as they returned.

The disguised scout cautiously peered out from beneath his closed eyelids, and noted with joy that there was no one on guard. But he could hardly believe this fact, and raising his head, keenly scrutinized the surrounding shadows. The result was the same.

Then he counted the forms of those lying around the fire, but that was of no use, and he cursed his folly in not doing so before, when he knew that all were present.

Several hours slowly passed on, and the fire had nearly

expired. Gale knew that the time had come for action, and cautiously whispered to his companion. She was awake and ready to do her part. The scout speedily selected his weapons from the pile, and that done, there was nothing to detain them.

Taking Jessie by the hand, and instructing her to proceed, the guide led the way over the prostrate forms of the Sioux, and they reached the edge of the little glade in safety. When the verge of the timber was gained, Zene told Jessie to await him there while he secured the horses.

Then creeping silently to where the two animals were picked that he had selected in his mind as the ones he should borrow, the scout stooped and began loosening the ropes, chuckling heartily to himself as he thought what fools the Sioux were, and picturing in glowing colors their rage and chagrin when they learned the loss of their two best horses, as well as the unceremonious departure of their guests.

But he laughed too soon, as he learned to his disgust, for a brawny pair of arms clasped his, drawing them behind his back, thus rendering all resistance vain. Gale cursed bitterly as he realized how he had been outwitted, and then he was led, together with Jessie, back to the camp-fires, which were replenished by the savages who he thought were so soundly sleeping, where he was hailed with jeers and peals of laughter.

The crestfallen scout did not reply to their taunts, and then he was bound securely with strips cut from the antelope-hides, and left to ponder over his misfortunes. Jessie was treated with more leniency, but still her hands were bound, while the end of the thong was secured to the wrist of Fox-Eye. As for Gale, he could move neither hand nor foot.

CHAPTER VIII.

SCOUTING INTO A QUANDARY

For some little time after the departure of Jessie and the guide, Triplett and Spencer remained silently within their covert. Although he did not say as much, Triplett was ill at ease, and fidgeting around, at length attracted Floye's attention, who said :

"What's the matter now, Hank? Any thing wrong?" "Gobs," was the terse reply.

"Well, what is it?" asked Floyd, rather impatiently.

"Jest this. What on 'arth be we stayin' hyar fer?" replied the scout.

"Waiting for Mr. Moss to arrive with the soldiers, of course."

"I know *that*, but hev ye any pertick'ler fancy to make a visit to yender hornets' nest afore they gits hyar? 'Case I hain't."

"What do you mean? Confound it, man, can't you speak out, without beating 'round the bush for an hour?" impatiently demanded Spencer.

"Now don't be snatched, young feller. Ye won't live any longer fer it," coolly replied Hank.

Then he continued, in a sharp, decisive tone, that showed his mind was fully made up:

"Fust an' fo'most, the gal an' Zene hev got cl'ar. In course they'll be missed, but, ef what he said was so, not much afore noon, ef any. Not ontill the king-pin gits back, 'tany rate. So much fer so much. Then 's a sartinty, they is hunted arter, 'cause he won't let a purty gal like Miss Jessie slip through his fingers arter the trouble he hed to git her, 'thout he cain't help 'imself. An' now, young feller, ye sees what I mean."

"This hole 'll be s'arched one o' the fust things, fer the trail, ef nuthin' else. They'll know he must 'a' *cached* the animile somewhar, 'cause when he left the cave he was on foot, likewise the gal; an' whar so likely as hyar? It's next to the river, an' clus by. They'll find the dead imp, an' then whar'll we be, ef we stays hyar?" added the old scout.

"We must leave here, that's settled; but where shall we go?" replied Spencer.

"We cain't go fur, 'cause we must be 'round when the squire comes an' gi'ns the word. This is my plan. We'll mount an' travel, keepin' this tim'er between us an' the hills, 'till we cross risin' ground. Then we'll turn an' circle 'round to the hills, whar we kin *cache* 'mong the cedars till our time comes."

As Spencer had no better plan in view, the two scouts prepared for departure. This was quickly accomplished, having

only to slip the bits into their horses' mouths and secure the strips of antelope-meat that they had partially cured by drying in the sun during their stay at the *motte*, after salting it, having a supply in their saddle-bags, brought from Ireton. Then, after a slight reconnoiter by Triplett, they rode from the grove on the side opposite the pass.

They rode at a rapid rate, for they knew that every moment they lingered upon the open prairie increased the risk of discovery. And a glimpse of one of them, caught by an outlaw, might frustrate their whole plot.

In about an hour the necessary *détour* was completed, and the foot of the hills safely reached without discovery. After some little time spent in the search, a snug covert for the horses was found, and they were secured within it, with a quantity of provender placed before them.

It was at the end of a slight ravine or defile, blocked by a huge overhanging rock, from whose rugged sides and front grew a tangled mass of stunted cedar and clustering vines. These hung low down, and aided by those upon the sides and level, formed a kind of room, dark even at midday. Not a glimpse of any thing within could be caught, unless the screen was lifted and the intruder stepped inside. Hank was greatly pleased with his discovery, for he cared more for his horse, if any thing, than he did for himself.

Leaving them there, the two scouts cautiously made their way through the underbrush toward a high point from which they could have a fair view of the entrance to the cavern and of the surrounding country. This they had noted from the *motte*, so there was little fear of their going astray, or drawing too near the cave.

In due course of time they reached the decided point, and securing a seat where they would be comfortable, and at the same time have a fair view to the entrance of the cave, they resigned themselves to the task of waiting and watching with the best grace they could summon. Had prudence not forbid their smoking, they would have been perfectly content; but they knew how far the pungent odor could be distinguished by the keen nostrils of an Indian, and feared the risk. To be sure it *might* be attributed to an outlaw, if it was discovered, but *there* was too much at stake to venture.

The sun had just passed the meridian, when a single horseman was seen approaching the hills, at a swift, regular gallop. Even at that distance it could be told that the stud was a noble one, and the rider an accomplished equestrian. The scouts surmised it was the outlaw leader, and they were right.

In a few minutes he drew rein at the *bend*, and apparently gave the required signals, but the distance was too far for the spies to tell. Then a man appeared and took the horse, while Toulmin entered the *cavé*.

During the next few minutes the scouts were chuckling heartily as they pictured the rage and chagrin of the robber, when he found that his white as well as *black* bird had flown away. Before long they saw Toulmin emerge, followed by a crowd of men, and could see him gesticulating as if in great anger.

Then they saw three savages dart away from the main body, and when clear of the defile, crouch and appear to be searching for the trail of the fugitives. One of the trio left the others and sped away toward the *motte*. The two spies chuckled heartily as they predicted the trail would not be found, for they well knew how the prairie was scored and cut up with trails running in every direction.

"'Tain't no manner of use, ye consarned fools, an' ye mought as well give it up for a bad job, fust as last," muttered Trippett, but his face instantly fell, and a shade of anxiety gathered over it.

"Thunder and lightnin', but I b'lieve it's us as is the cussed fools arter all. S'pose the feller 'at owns the horse that Gale cabbaged is 'mong them thar fellers? Won't he be like to *know his own hoss's trail?*"

"But how could that be avoided?" replied Spencer.

"Easy 'nough. Ef I'd on'y 'a' dreamed o' sech a thin', I'd 'a' pared the edges off o' the animal's hoofs. Wal, it cain't be helped now, an' they has got a right smart start, ef nothin' has happened to them," and then the scouts watched the movements of those below in silence.

They could see men bringing forth horses from the lower *cavé*, that was used for a stable, all saddled and bridled ready for the road, and then two-thirds of the band mounted and

appeared ready to move on at a moment's notice. Presently the trail-hunter was seen rapidly returning from the *motte*, and the scouts knew that he had either discovered the route taken by the fugitives, or had found the dead body of the Indian killed by Hark, when spying on the movements of Gale; perhaps both.

But they were not left long in ignorance. The scout called in his two fellows, who were still searching the prairies, and the spies knew the trail had been discovered. As the three Indians appeared in view of the main body, they paused, and set up the long, mournful death-wail, telling but too plainly that the scalpless body of one of their comrades had been found.

Then Toulmin spurred forward, and apparently questioned the Indian. That he was satisfied with the report, the two spies plainly saw, for he waved his hand to his men and started at their head at full speed for the *motte*.

Several Indians went along more slowly, for they were on foot, and soon reappeared bearing the savage. Far beyond the timber island were the outlaws riding in a close clump, while at a little distance ahead glided the dusky, half-nude trail-hunters on foot, but still at such a pace that a steady gallop was necessary to keep them within easy hailing distance of the band.

"It's a bad shake for the gal, ef any thin' has happened out o' the way, fer these imps 'd trail them through the air, e'na'most," muttered the old guide, with a dissatisfied air.

"But how do you know any thing *has* happened?" asked Spencer, a little uneasily.

"I don't *know* it; I on'y jest feel that away. 'Pears like sunkthin' war wrong. I feel it in my bones, like, an' that sign sea'cely ever fools me," replied Triplett. "But don't let's think about that; 'twon't do any good. Lord, what a chaince we'd hev ef the squire'd on'y come along afore those fellers git back. Fust, we'd clean out them fellers as is in the hole, then snipe up the rest as they come in. We could do it jest as easy as fallin' off a log," he added, enthusiastically.

"What do you think is detaining him?" queried Floyd. "He should have been here two days ago, if nothing serious had happened. If he don't come to-morrow, I, for one, am

going to leave here, and see what I can do myself. We have found this nest of the serpents, and if we don't scratch them it won't be my fault."

"P'r'aps he cain't git nobody to come along wi' him," suggested Hank.

"I have little fear of that. He had plenty of money at his command, and he is not the man to spare it in such a case. And with that, you know, a person can do almost any thing," replied Floyd.

They continued the conversation for some time, as they had little fear of eavesdroppers in the position they then occupied.

The hours rolled on slowly enough to the two spies, without any event occurring to disturb them or arouse their curiosity. The sun was near the horizon, not more than an hour high, when Spencer was seized with a fit of sneezing. In vain he strove to check it. He compressed his nostrils, and placed his hand over his mouth, but still the explosion would forth.

While he was wiping his streaming eyes, Hank uttered a low hiss, and half rising, bent his head to listen more intently. His keen ear had caught a slight rustle among the cedars above them, but he did not know whether it was caused by a foe, or only by the rather fresh wind that had lately risen.

They were not kept long in suspense, for the shrill, piercing war-whoop of the Cheyennes pealed forth from the hill-top, and before they could rise to their feet, the foe was upon them.

Literally so, in Triplett's case, for a huge, brawny Indian alighted full upon his shoulders. But, as the guide partially turned, he had caught a glimpse of the maneuver, and ducking his head, when the savage alighted he shook his body like a miniature earthquake, and the Cheyenne was tossed headfirst over the precipice on their front, where he met with no mercy at the hands of the jagged rocks below, save a speedy and painless death.

Hark had not rid himself of this enemy a moment too soon, for as he straightened erect, he saw Spencer borne to the ground by several outlaws, while still others were descending from above.

Seeing his comrade *hors du combat*, and knowing that he would be soon in the same condition if he remained, Hank

now thought of escape. He stood near the path that wound around the hill. This was the only avenue left open. Discharging his pistols into the crowd, he rushed forward and knocked down one of them, a small man, with the pistol-butt. A bullet pierced his side, another gashed his cheek, while an arrow quivered in his shoulder. He caught up the senseless man, who, being a light weight, the sturdy guide flung him over his shoulder, and bounded with frightful speed down the rugged pathway.

For a moment the outlaws stood astounded at this action, which was accomplished so quickly that they could not have prevented it had they tried to do so. Then they surged with wild yells of rage, after the daring spy.

The momentary hesitation of the outlaws, however, had given Triplett the start, an advantage they could not regain, despite all their efforts, and the guide reached the defile at the foot of the hill. Then they did what they should have done before, and the bullets began to whistle after the fugitive. But he appeared to bear a charmed life, and sped on uninjured. Then the dull, peculiar thud of a bullet entering flesh was heard, and the captive Hank still held uttered a wild shriek of agony.

Triplet dropped the body and fled with increased speed. Nothing remained for it but simple fleetness of foot. It was a plain "stern chase," the walls of the precipice on either hand constraining his pursuers to follow directly in Triplett's footsteps.

He continued to gain upon them, and when he reached the spot where the horses were concealed, he was fully two hundred yards ahead. Without stopping to replace the bits that hung from the horse's mouth, he leaped upon his steed, "Silver Heels," and leading Spencer's horse, spurred out upon the prairie.

When at a little distance from the pass, he paused, and when the outlaws appeared, he uttered a defiant cry and taunt, then turned and galloped swiftly away. Pursuit was made, but late in the night the Read Agents returned crestfallen, having been completely foiled and distanced.

When Spencer regained his consciousness his arms were drawn back and pinioned at the elbow, behind his back. Then

he was dragged and pushed down the winding path, and conducted to the cave.

Entering, they passed through the same apartments as Toulmin did with Jessie, and the captive was thrust into a dark hole, where he was left with his arms still bound. He staggered across the room and stumbled over a prostrate form, that, emitting a feeble groan, told him he had a companion in misery.

CHAPTER IX.

THE DEATH-SHOT.

THE party under Toulmin made rapid progress upon the trail of the fugitives, although their trail-hunters were upon foot. But, they were justly celebrated as runners, having often served their tribe, the Cheyennes, in that capacity, and could cover more ground in a day, with less fatigue, than the generality of horses.

Then they were delayed but little by having to search for the trail. The speed at which Gale had traveled, as well as the nature of the ground, precluded any systematic attempt at breaking it. The result was that the Agents traveled at a rapid pace, but little if any slower than the twain they were hunting.

Toulmin was an adept in prairie life, and he was far too wary to risk running his head into an ambush, or to come into collision with any foe that might be in their path without timely notice. To insure this he allowed one scout to gain an advance of over a mile, sending the most skillful and reliable of the trio. This distance he was to maintain. A second was stationed about midway, while the third was kept at a hundred yards from the main party.

In this manner, warning would be had of any enemy in front. Then the certainty of keeping on the right trail was doubled, for should one stray, the chances were that one of the others would be more successful.

Thus mile after mile was traversed, and the party did not

halt until the shades of night had blotted the trail for the time being. Toulmin was sorely tempted to continue on by torch-light, but he did not dare do so. If an enemy were upon the prairie for miles around, the lights would attract them, and the distance gained by such means would not repay the risk; besides, the horses of his party were somewhat jaded, and a night's work would unfit them for any emergency that might arise at any moment.

At earliest dawn the scouts resumed the relative position they had occupied before, and the cavalcade swept rapidly over the prairie, dashing the sparkling dew-drops right merrily from the long grass, and frightening the birds from their roosts. They broke their fast while in the saddle; time was too precious to waste.

The sun was not more than an hour above the eastern hills, when the most advanced scout was seen standing upon a high ridge of ground, and Toulmin dashed forward to ask the meaning. It lay before him as he followed the gesture of the savage. It was the point where the Sioux had struck the trail of Jessie Moss and Zene Gale.

One glance showed him the whole circumstance, as well as if he had been an eye-witness to it. He saw where the fugitives had abruptly paused, then shot off at right-angles with the course they had been pursuing, and then their tracks were obliterated by the hoof-prints of the savages, thus plainly showing they had pressed hard after them.

A gleam of joy lit up his pallid countenance, for he saw that there was a hope of recapturing the maiden he had begun to fear was lost to him forever. The scouts told him, and he could see for himself, that his force was fully equal if not superior to that of the new actors in the drama. He knew that the foe was of some Indian tribe, for had they been whites the fugitives would have sought their protection, rather than be fleeing from them.

Of what tribe they were he could not tell, but should they prove inimical he knew he could depend upon his followers, and had no fears for the result should they come to blows. On the other hand, were they peaceful, he could easily purchase Jessie from them.

These thoughts flashed through Toulmin's mind as the

double trail was followed in the same order as before, save that the head scout had increased his lead a full third more.

After a couple of miles had been traversed, this Indian found a half-worn moccasin upon the trail, where it had evidently been dropped by its owner, who did not think it of sufficient importance to stop for during the race. One glance told him that it belonged to a Sioux brave, and a fierce gleam of vindictive joy swept athwart his dusky visage as he noted this. For besides being hereditary enemies, he had particularly bitter cause for hatred toward the band or division of the Dacotah tribe known as the "Burnt Wood Tetons."

Plucking a dried weed, he stuck one end of it into the ground, then placing the moccasin upon the other, continued his lope along the plainly-defined trail.

Shortly afterward they reached the point where the fugitives had been overtaken, and the trail turned abruptly toward the north-east. Toulmin's eyes glistened with joy as he noted the slow pace that the Sioux had fallen into, for he knew that unless this had been speedily changed, his chances for overtaking them before night were very fair. And once within view, he had little fears for the rest.

They rode rapidly on until nearly noon, and began to think of finding some place where they could get water for the horses as well as grass, when they saw the head scout coming toward them on a keen run, but crouching almost on a level with the tall grass, and motioning them back. Toulmin ordered a halt, and then awaited the approach of the trail-hunter.

He paused as he met the second scout, and after a few hasty words, sent him ahead to the top of the high ground, where he dropped down amid the grass, apparently acting as look-out in the direction the band had been heading.

"Well, Metarapoo, what have you seen that has so badly scared you?" asked Toulmin, as the runner paused before him.

"No scare; glad a heap," uttered the Cheyenne, then continuing in his own tongue, which the outlaw leader was master of.

"Metarapoo has seen the camp of the Sioux. They are ~~kick~~; they stick their heads in the bushes, and then they are

hid, like the rattlesnake. Their scalps are ready for my white brother. He has but to stretch out his hands and take them."

"Confound your roundabout talk; can't you speak so a body can tell what you have found out without beating round the bush an hour?" angrily cried Toulmin.

"A cloud is over the white chief's eyes. Metarapoo will brush it away," retorted the Cheyenne chief. "Over yonder hill, three miles distant, stands a *motte* upon the banks of a creek. In that wood a band of red-men are encamped. They number seven hands and four fingers," he rapidly stated.

"But how do you know they are the men we are after?" asked the captain.

"Metarapoo is a Cheyenne. He has eyes and is not blind like the rat with wings. Does he not know the horse he has raised from a colt? The horse stole by the man of night is there. Is the chief satisfied?" haughtily replied the savage.

"Let the great chief shut his ears to the hot words spoken by his friends," apologized Toulmin. "The White Bear was wrong. Let Metarapoo tell him how to act," he added, for he was desirous of mollifying the Cheyenne, who, he knew, could be a bitter and dangerous enemy if he willed it.

The chief was highly gratified, and expressed his views as to the best course to pursue. The band was to retreat, and their trail covered as well as possible until they had reached a deep ravine at some little distance in the rear. Here they were to wait, while guards were posted on every side, upon the highest ground available, to announce the approach of any person, and to keep a good watch upon the *motte* where the Sioux were encamped.

Then he would advance as near as possible, under cover of the tall grass, and learn whether they contemplated removing, or remaining where they were, if this could be done.

As soon as night fell, he would enter the *motte*, and if possible liberate the bonds of the two captives, so that they could flee at the first alarm; for unless they did so, the first act of the Sioux would be to tomahawk them at once, rather than run the risk of having them recaptured.

Gale had passed a most uncomfortable night after his futile attempt at escape. He was bound until he could move neither

hand nor foot, and the bonds were drawn so tightly that he suffered intense pain. The circulation of blood being stopped, his flesh had swollen until the cords were buried deep in his legs and arms, while his feet had been placed higher than his head, as if to add to his torture.

When day dawned and the savages awoke, the captives expected they would be conveyed to the village of the Sioux, but during the morning meal Gale learned that the party were not going to resume their journey. That they intended waiting where they were until the arrival of another band belonging to the party, who were expected at this point, the appointed rendezvous, some time during the day.

This fact he communicated to Jessie, and they hailed with delight the brief respite thus obtained. For they knew their fate would not be determined until the entire band was collected, even if they were not spared until the village was reached, in order that all might enjoy the sport.

The day passed drearily enough, but the expected band did not arrive. The Sioux began to grow uneasy, but after some discussion concluded to remain at the *motte* until morning, when, if their comrades did not arrive, they would make the best of their way to the village.

After supper the captives were secured beneath a tree at a little distance from the fires, as they had been the preceding night. A guard was set over the horses; then the remainder stretched out around the dying embers, where they soon fell asleep.

Midnight came. Gale's quick senses, all alive, then distinctly heard his name whispered from behind the tree to which he was bound. He gave a low hiss in reply, when he felt a sharp blade sever the thongs that bound his arms. A hand then clasped his and left in his grasp the knife, while a guttural voice whispered :

"When hear shoot come, den take squaw an' run."

Reaching down, he severed the cords that bound his feet, and then cautiously arousing Jessie, he told her what had occurred. Then they awaited in painful suspense for the *dénouement*.

When Metarapoo had liberated Gale, he glided from the timber, repassing the dozing horse-guards in safety, and when

he was out of ear-shot hastened at the top of his speed to where the Road Agents had halted, and in a few words told Toulmin what he had accomplished. Then the band cautiously approached, and when near the *motte*, Metarapoo and his two brother scouts crawled forward to dispose of the two somnolent sentinels.

This was done, but, writhing from the hand that clutched his throat, the guard uttered a faint death-yell, that partially aroused the sleeping Sioux. As they leaped to their feet, Gale did the same, and catching hold of Jessie's hand, darted out through the timber onto the open prairie. But they were seen, and the savages bounded after them with frightful yells and hoots.

The disguised scout ran full among a body of horsemen that were approaching, and fearful lest they should mistake them for enemies, shouted out his name and that of the maiden. A man leaped from his horse, and knocking Gale down with a clubbed pistol, seized Jessie and told one of his men to take her out of harin's way. Then remounting, Toulmin dashed into the thickest of the fray, for the two bands had come into collision.

And then followed one of those scenes of deadly strife, short and thrilling, in which the rival races, the red-men and the white, were pitted against each other, where circumvention and subtlety are laid aside for mere brute force.

The rifles and guns were thrown aside after the first volley and then the sharp detonation of revolvers answered the twang of bow-strings, while those on foot met hand to hand with steel clashing against steel. It seemed as though pandemonium had broken loose and that fiends met demons in deadly strife, so wild and unearthly was the din.

Gale soon recovered his senses, and glancing around saw that the Road Agents must speedily prove victorious. He now knew who his rescuers were, and that his fate would be none the less certain in their hands than in the scarcely more to be dreaded Sioux. But he would not flee and abandon Jessie; it was not his way of doing things.

Then his gaze fell upon the man who had been given charge of the young girl, and who had retired to a little distance from the scene of strife. He was seated upon a horse,

holding Jessie before him, prepared for instant flight should fate declare itself against his comrades. Gale still retained the knife that had been left with him by Metarapoo when the latter had severed his bonds.

Dropping down in the friendly grass he rapidly glided in a half circle around the outlaw, so as to gain his rear unsuspected. This was the work of but a few moments, and really he had no time to lose, for the Sioux were rapidly becoming demoralized before the overpowering force and superior weapons of the Agents.

Gale silently arose directly behind the horseman, and with a panther-like bound, grasped him by the throat and plunged the keen blade deep in his breast. He did not even utter a moan, the blow was so sure and deadly, but as the guide withdrew the knife from the wound, the hot life-blood sprinkled Jessie's face, and not knowing the real state of affairs she uttered a long, piercing scream.

Dropping the corpse that he supported, Gale leaped upon the horse, and digging his heels into the flanks of the startled animal, they bounded away over the prairie from the scene of blood. A word reassured Jessie, and hope returned to her breast. But this was soon dissipated, for Zene hissed a bitter imprecation through his teeth and urged their horse to greater speed. A hoarse shout of rage, and then the quick trampling of hoofs behind them told they were discovered and that nothing but the speed of their horse could save them from recapture.

In fact, the unfortunate shriek of Jessie had reached the ears of the outlaw leader, and he turned just in time to see the negro, as he still supposed Gale to be, leap up behind the maiden and dash over the rise in the prairie. With a fierce oath he spurred after them.

The moon, now near its full, shed a bright, silvery sheen over the surrounding objects, and by its light Toulmin had no difficulty in keeping on the trail of the fugitives. He perceived with a fierce, vindictive joy, that he was rapidly overhauling them, and replaced the discharged chambers of his revolver with a fresh cylinder. The cold, steel-like glitter in his blue eyes told that the disguised scout would receive but slight mercy, were he overtaken.

The doubly-laden horse responded nobly to the voice of Gale, but he was overmatched, and slowly but surely losing his vantage-ground. Toulmin was long since within range, but he feared to risk a shot lest he should injure Jessie.

But it fast grew to a climax, this unequal race, and after a few more bounds the outlaw leveled his pistol, and, at the crack, Zenas Gale reeled in his seat mortally wounded. Still his indomitable spirit did not quail. Sharply turning his horse's head, he cast, with his last dying effort, the heavy knife full at his murderer. Toulmin evaded it by swaying to one side, and even as the guide fell from his horse, he fired another shot at his victim. But it did no further harm. It could not; the scout was dead, with his finger upon the trigger.

When Toulmin was fully satisfied of this fact, he caught the horse by the bridle, and raising Jessie to the saddle, turned and led the way back to the *motte*, where his men had proved victorious, as the wild, hoarse shouts proclaimed.

CHAPTER X.

THE DEATH-DOOM.

WHEN Hank Triplett was fully satisfied that he had distanced the pursuing Agents, and not fearing their trailing him by the faint, hazy light of the moon, he returned to the hills by making a wide *détour* so as to avoid the outlaws should they have scattered during the chase. Once among the hills he soon found a snug covert for both the horse and himself.

His reasons for this course were twofold. He knew that the pirates would not be likely to suspect him of again venturing near their retreat so soon after his narrow escape. And then the only covert near the "Three Mounds" was the *motte* so often mentioned, and was the only spot where a man and horse could lie concealed unless they took to the hills. The prairie island was now out of the question, and as he wished

to join the party under Wyvil Moss as soon as possible after the signal was given, Hank had thus doubled on his trail.

He did not wish to go direct to the Mounds, lest they should be searched in the morning and his trail betray the fact of his remaining in the neighborhood. Then such a watch would be kept up that of a surety the rescuing party would be discovered on its first approach, and thus render their object futile. For he knew from Zene Gale's description of the place and disposition of the outlaws, that mere force could not reduce the place without fearful loss of life, but that they must depend upon stratagem for success.

Hank at length fell into a sound sleep, that lasted until after the sun had risen. After attending to the horses and eating a cold bite himself, Hank sallied out to seek a point where he could both overlook the stronghold and Briggs' Knob.

This he succeeded in doing without discovery, and to his joy saw that there were no signs of life around the cave, thus showing that the inmates had no idea of his having returned to this vicinity. His vigil received no reward until late in the afternoon, when he saw a thin column of smoke rise from the summit of the Knob, and he knew that at least Wyvil Moss had arrived. Rapidly gliding to the covert of the horses, he spurred by a roundabout way to the Mound.

When within a short distance of the rendezvous, he dismounted again and crawled along until he had a fair view of the valley that lay between the Mounds. To his delight he saw over three-score horses feeding at ease upon the tall grass that reached their counters. He could see by their housings that they belonged to soldiers.

As he stepped into view, a hoarse challenge to halt met his ear, and a crowd of men surrounded him. He glanced around, and not seeing Wyvil Moss, asked where he was, speaking to a young lieutenant.

Moss, hearing the voice, came forward. He had sadly changed during the fortnight since Jessie's abduction, and was but the shadow of the pale, handsome man we first knew. But his face lit up now, and he strove to question Hank regarding his child, but he could not. The words choked him, and he could not speak.

"It's all right, squire, leastways I consait it is. The gal—Miss Jessie, I mean—got cl'ar o' the imps as hed her, an' started fer the settlemints wi' Zene Gale, an' I reckon she's safe by this time."

"Why—how was it, old friend?—tell me all, quick," cried Moss, in a husky whisper, as he sunk down upon the grass, too faint to stand erect.

And Triplett, after he imitated the bereaved father, narrated, slowly and succinctly, the events, so far as he was conversant with them, that we have described.

"Yes," he added, "the white-skinned nigger is arter 'em like a thousan' o' bricks, but 'less somethin' unusual happined, they're safe long ago. They had too big a start to be grapped in a fa'r tail on eend chase, an' that we'll s'pose they had.

"Ef so, they is safe, but the lad, Spencer, hain't, not by a jugful, an' 'less we help 'im out o' the scrape, he'll go under when that corn-switched varmint gits back, shore. An' he's too peart a lad to be sarved sech a way. 'Sides, you must 'member he got trapped when he war tryin' to save your darter. An' so it's no more'n right you shed gi'n 'im a lift, 'spicably as it's easy did. We can raise the whole caboodle o' them fellers jest like mice, an' I move we do it," added Hank, emphatically.

"But Jessie—my daughter—" began Moss.

"Ef she got cl'ar o' those fellers as war arter her, she's safe, shore; an' ef she *didn't*, don't ye see they'll fetch her back hyar ag'in? While ef we start arter 'em, we may miss 'em on the road; an' once let the whole band git inside o' the cave, an' we'd need a whole rij'ment o' sojers to take 'em. Don't ye see? But ef we take these few *fust*, an' then lay low fer t'others when they come back, why we can bag the lot, jest as easy."

"I believe you are right, Triplett, and I agree to what you say. And now, tell me your plans, or rather the details of them, as what we do must be done quickly."

The reason of his long delay was simply because he could find no person who could guide him to the points designated by Gale, for a long time; but at length this was done, and they had just arrived and dispatched the guide to light the signal.

All this confab consumed time, but that was immaterial, as Hank thought it best not to attempt taking the robbers' stronghold until near midnight, when they would be considerably under the influence of liquor, and the task thus rendered so much easier and less dangerous.

But at length he gave the word, and the party started on their perilous mission. Hank had selected the man who had guided the soldiers thither as the one to accompany him when he attempted the task of silencing the guards.

This was a middle-aged trapper of herculean build, brave to a fault, but at the same time prudent and wary. Ralph Norton had been one of his old chums when he had followed the pursuit of trapping, and they had tested each other's courage and skill in a thousand different dangers. They "worked well in double harness," as the phrase runs.

They quickly reached the entrance to the defile, and Hank advanced to reconnoiter, so that the alarm might not be given, and their plans frustrated by any restive outlaw who might be cooling his heated blood in the fresh night-air.

When the *bend* was reached, the two scouts advanced alone, and when they caught sight of the huge boulder that barred the way, they paused and sounded the necessary signals, which were promptly replied to, and the door swung open, thus revealing the entrance to the cavern.

Though their hearts beat somewhat quicker, the nerves of the scouts were like steel. It was no common task they had undertaken, for should their calculations err, should there be more than two men on guard, the alarm would probably be given, and then it would be hand to hand without the advantage of a complete surprise, while the bandits, knowing every nook and cranny in the cave, might take up such a position as would enable them to successfully resist the soldiers.

Such were the thoughts of all, but the guides did not falter, and rapidly advanced to the entrance. There was no light save that of the moon, and they wore slouched hats pulled down to their eyes, so that nothing but the mass of hair that shrouded the lower part of their faces could be seen. They entered the cave, and one of the men said:

"Where did you drop from, Jim; has the captain got back?" Hank saw the outlaw's mistake and replied in a gruff tone,

coughing as if he had a bad cold, the more effectually to disguise his voice.

"He'll be along purty soon. I came on ahead a little."

"Did he catch the girl and the nigger?"

"Yas; got them all hunky. But who is here with you?" asked Hank, anxiously, dreading lest the reply should dash his hopes to the ground.

"Only Henshaw. Where are you Hen? Come up and hear the news."

By this time the two scouts had become partially accustomed to the darkness that was slightly broken by the moonlight streaming in at several loopholes near the ceiling. It was not clear enough to enable them to distinguish features, while they could but imperfectly make out the dim, shadow-like forms of the Road Agents. There was sufficient, however, and as Henshaw slowly approached, stretching himself and yawning terribly, as though just awakened from a sound nap, Triplett muttered to Norton:

"Take him, pard. This 'ne's my meat!" at the same time clutching the astonished outlaw by the throat with both hands and pressing him back to the ground they fell heavily, the scout uppermost with his knee on the Agent's breast.

The man strove to give the alarm, but the iron grasp of the old borderer was sure, and he gave but a convulsive gurgle. For a few moments Hank continued the pressure, then removing his right hand he drew his knife and plunged it in the bandit's heart. A feeble gasp, a convulsive quiver, and the Road Agent was dead.

Ralph Norton was equally as successful, for the man called Henshaw was more than half asleep, and offered no resistance to his huge adversary, who broke his neck with one vigorous twist, then sheathed his long blade in the senseless carcass.

They listened intently to see if the slight noise of the scuffle had alarmed the outlaws, but all was still save now and then a faint sound of laughter, or the crash of glass, as a bottle or goblet was thrown upon the rocky floor and shivered to pieces.

Telling Norton to remain where he was and to allow no one egress or ingress, Triplett cautiously advanced in the direction of the revelry. In a few moments he had reached

point from whence he could see into the apartment where the double murder had been enacted on the first evening of Jessie Moss' arrival.

Keeping without the circle of light, he saw with pleasure that their work was half done, whisky being the friendly agent. A number of the outlaws, both white and red, were lying under the table or upon the pile of furs, while the remainder were more or less under the influence of the same insidious foe.

Having carefully noted their number and disposition, Hank turned and rapidly made his way back to the band of soldiers, and in a few hurried words, told them what had been done. Dismounting, their horses were secured to the projecting rocks.

Cautioning them to follow noiselessly in his footsteps, the guide led the way into the cave, and in a few moments the entire band were disposed in two ranks, the front one kneeling, while those in the rear aimed over their heads, across the wide passage that led into the room where the outlaws were all congregated.

These had little idea of the doom that was threatening them as they kept up their orgies, and the din increased as the liquor flowed more freely. They were most of them unarmed, although weapons were ranged along the wall behind them, and could be quickly grasped.

Each man singled out his mark, and over three-score firearms were leveled at the unconscious outlaws within close range. Then came loud and clear the order:

"Fire, boys, and then charge home!" given by Lieutenant Frayne.

And that was the last sound that the majority of the robbers heard upon this earth. They deserved no mercy and they received none. They were shot down like wolves.

But a few under lead of "Wolf-Eye," the lieutenant of the gang, had seized their weapons, and being near the further end of the room, they fled before the smoke had risen. They were seen just as they entered a room that was partially closed in by a huge rock so arranged as to turn upon a pivot, and then fastened firm within by several wedge-shaped rocks. When this swung into place, there was only a long, narrow aperture between its top edge and the ceiling overhead that

came down in a long ridge to within four feet of the floor. The hole was small, not over ten feet square, and those within could perfectly screen themselves by lying flat on the floor, while any person trying to obtain a view of them would have to expose his own person to their aim. There was no elevation within the cave from whence a shot could be delivered with success.

The soldiers, excited by the burning of gunpowder, rushed impetuously at this barrier, for they did not know the real facts of the case and supposed that the outlaws had continued their flight. But they were soon undeceived, to their cost. As they reached the stone, several of them thrust their heads through the aperture to learn the best mode of moving the rock. It was a foolhardy action, and carried its own punishment along with it. All was dark within and they saw nothing.

Then the crash of five rifles came and belched their contents in the crowd, so close that the powder singed the faces of the unfortunate soldiers, five of whom fell dead with their heads literally dashed to pieces. The noise of the discharge was deafening within the close walls, and the echoes rolled from point to point throughout the cavern.

The comrades of the dead men stood aghast, their death was so sudden and unexpected. They were about rushing in a body to avenge their fate, but their leader ordered them back, for he saw by the lamplight how vain it would be to storm the retreat under the present circumstances. He knew that it could not be done without fearful loss of life, and he knew that all his forces would be needed to cope with the main body under Toulmin, and to reach the fort in safety afterward.

Norton was standing behind a ledge, his rifle leveled and elbow resting upon the rock. He was confident that another volley would be fired, and mentally vowed that it should be the last one for at least one of the robbers. He had warned his comrades of the danger they were in, and most of them had sought cover, but occasionally one would expose himself thoughtlessly, although so far no harm had been done.

The outlaws, by keeping back from the opening, could overlook the entire area before the loophole without danger of being seen, and could thus secure a good aim upon any one

who exposed himself in moving to and fro. The old trapper knew this, and that, by firing *at the flash*, he would "sive" his mark. He had not long to wait, for as a soldier more fully exposed himself a rifle-ball from the fort pierced his brain. But, like an echo, Ralph's rifle was discharged, the sound of a heavy fall and ringing of the gun as it struck the rocks, told plainly that it had performed its duty well. Then all was silence when the reverberation had died away.

The men looked at each other with the same question in their eyes. It was easily read ; how should they remove this annoying obstacle from their path ? But it was not so easily answered. From their position the outlaws could command the whole apartment, as well as the entrance to it from the outer world. Thus, did a man enter or pass through the outer room, it would be at the risk of receiving a compliment in the shape of a ragged bullet.

Ralph Norton, after his successful shot, had reloaded his rifle, and stood in readiness should another robber try his luck. Hank Triplett had glided from the room, and after being absent a short time returned, bearing a huge armful of dry wood. This he held in such a manner that only his hands and feet were exposed, and he reached his covert in safety. When here he deliberately started a fire, and feeding it carefully, soon had the ends of the sticks in a brisk blaze. Then he called out for a dozen men to be sent back to the entrance to keep watch in the defile, lest they should be surprised in their turn. For by this time the entire band had gathered around the one room.

To cover this movement, Lieutenant Frayne ordered his men to keep up a brisk fire upon the crevice so as to prevent the outlaws firing another volley. This plan proved successful, and the detailed men withdrew from the spot in safety.

Hank directed that the fusilade should be kept up, only one man to fire at a time, but with no perceptible interval between, while he carried out his plans for roasting out the Road Agents. Seizing a couple of the blazing brands, he ran noiselessly forward and crouching beneath the loophole, he thrust them through the aperture.

A cry of pain and rage followed his experiment, and told that the fiery shower had fallen full upon the outlaws as they

crouched to the floor to avoid the bullets that pattered against the stone sides, falling in a shower at their feet, flattened by the concussion. They were so surprised that one of them must have leaped to his feet and been struck by a bullet, for a deep groan of agony was heard, then once more all was still.

Presently the firing was resumed to allow Triplett a chance to continue his work. This was soon completed, and the interior of the little room was fully lighted up, so should one of the inmates arise to his feet he could plainly be seen. The brands were kicked about, but the wood was dry as tinder, and could not easily be quenched ; the coals still glowed, and their quarters must have become uncomfortably warm, for the concealed robbers were heard growling and cursing with rage. After a while, Hank raised his voice and hailed them :

“ Say, ye fellers in thar, don’t ye think ye’d better gi’n up ? ‘Tain’t no manner o’ use ye foolin’ any longer, ‘case we’ve got the dead wood on ye, this pop.”

Their reply, still defiant, was a politely-worded direction for the entire party to hasten forthwith to a certain remote region, nameless to polite ears, where, if legends are to be believed, they would find the weather warm enough to dispense with an overcoat. But it is, perhaps, needless to state that they respectfully declined the invitation, doubtless thinking they would see enough of the Road Agents in this upper sphere.

“ Wal, we hain’t overly pertick’ler, but ‘less ye come out o’ thet in less than ten minutes, why, we’ll try what vartue thar is in powder. Thar’s plenty a-hangin’ up round hyar. What’d ye think the consequince ‘ud be, a-throwin’ a full horn in thar, ef *the stopper war pulled out?* We’ll do it fer shore, ‘less ye gi’n up.”

There was no immediate reply to this, but they could hear the outlaws in earnest consultation, evidently startled by the significant threat. They had no doubt that it would be unhesitatingly fulfilled ; if so, there could be but one ending. Presently Eyre spoke :

“ Well, what terms do you offer ?—what will be our treatment if we surrender ?”

"Bah! what do you take us for? Come out, and we will talk afterward," replied Frayne.

"I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll surrender peacefully, and I'll tell you where your friends are confined, if you will give me a fair chance to wipe out the man that killed my chum here. The one that answered our shot, I mean. If you say *no* then come and take us, and the prisoners may rot where they are. You might hunt a year, and not find them then. I only ask a fair hand-to-hand fight with the fellow. Then you may do as you please," cried out Wolf-Eye.

Frayne was about to contemptuously refuse this, when Norton laughed.

"Say yes, mister. If he wants a little fun, I'm agreeable. I haven't had a real up-and-down spat for some time, and if he gets the better of me, why, he'll earn the honor, that's all."

"But you don't know who or what he is!" protested Frayne.

"What difference? Do I look like a man who stops to count up whether the chances are all for me or not? If he gets rubbed out, why, there is one the less to guard back to Leavenworth."

"It's all right, mister man. Jest throw out y'ur weepons, an' then open the door. Ye won't be hurt till the time comes," called out Hank, cheerily.

After a little delay this was done, and the three surviving outlaws stepped boldly out into the larger room. The two were each securely bound, and in reply to their questions regarding their fate, were told that they would be handed over to the military commander of the western department, to be dealt with as he might determine.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CLOSING SCENE.

WHEN Wolfe-Eye was confronted with the man he had so boldly challenged to mortal combat, he could not restrain a glance of admiration for the magnificent physique of the trapper as he leisurely stripped for the duel. And it was no wonder, for you would have to search long and far before you could find his equal.

Ralph Norton was well known all over the Far West, and you may yet hear him alluded to in terms of general respect, for I am now describing a man who really existed at the time and region in question; not a mere fancy character. Many are now living who can remember him and relate the story of his life and death, and bear testimony to the truthfulness and accuracy of the description given.

He stood six feet two and one-half inches in his moccasins; measured twenty-seven inches across his shoulders, with an enormous girth of chest. He had handsome, clearly-cut features, and a deep, yet ringing voice, and having in his youth received a good education, his language was correct, and he possessed few of the rough actions and habits common to his class and profession. He was wild and terrible when angered, but a friend ever found him kind and gentle as a woman. An unerring shot, trustworthy guide and scout, swift of foot and nearly as tireless as a wolf; an unsurpassed horseman; Ralph Norton was the model of a genuine mountain man.

In preparing for the duel, he stripped to the waist, thus revealing fully the magnificent play of the huge, steel-like muscles, and contour of his chest and shoulders. His hands were small, but his arms like piston-rods, which, while white, seemed of the consistency of sole-leather. And although so large, there was no superfluous flesh about him. With a handkerchief bound tightly around his forehead to hold back the long hair, as well as to absorb the perspiration, and a

long, well-tested knife in his hand, he announced himself as being ready.

The outlaw was not much over the medium height, and rather slender, appearing but a stripling by the side of his huge antagonist. But, in fighting parlance, he "stripped large." His form was round and full, especially so about the chest, while his supple waist and long, muscular thighs denoted great activity. His dark skin, very hairy, had a bronzed tinge that told the splendid condition he was in. His arms were unusually long and the muscles knotted and writhed as he moved them. He fully appreciated his antagonist, but did not seem to fear for the result.

There were but two besides himself who did not deem it worse than folly for him to cope with Norton, and these were the latter and old Hank. They knew that Wolfe-Eye would prove himself worthy any foeman's steel.

When the two stood up and faced each other, all held their breath. If Norton might be compared to a full-grown lion in its prime, Eyre could with no less propriety be likened to the lithe, sinewy tiger. And the position he assumed further carried out the semblance.

His round, agile form was bent forward like a panther preparing to spring, the muscles of his hairy chest and arms working and crawling like snakes. His small black eyes shone and sparkled with a serpent-like gleam, while his long, Indian-like hair hung damp-like around his face and shoulders.

Norton stood in an attitude of careless grace, and a casual observer would have pronounced him a novice in the use of the terrible weapon he held loosely in his right hand, which hung listlessly by his side. But to his comrade and chum, Hank Triplett, who well knew his skill in that weapon, the case looked different.

A pleasant smile played upon his handsome face, but a cold, steel-like glitter could be seen in his blue eye, which told that he was fully aware of the task that awaited him, and in no way underrated his antagonist.

For a moment they stood thus, then, with a wild yell that thrilled the spectators, Wolf-Eye bounded forward and made a venomous thrust at Ralph. Quick as the assault was, it was

met by the latter, whose blade parried the stroke, while his left hand shot out like a battering-ram, and alighted full upon the temple of the outlaw, felling him like an ox in the shambles. Had he followed up his advantage, as he was entitled to by the laws of the position, the duel would have been ended almost ere it had begun. But he again stood silent in the same attitude, until his foe arose, and once more advanced, with the blood streaming from his forehead, and a bewildered look upon his features at the unlooked-for tactics of his adversary.

"Are you ready?" inquired Norton.

"Yes, curse you!" hissed Eyre.

"Then guard yourself!" cried Ralph, springing forward, and the knives met with a clash that cast a tiny shower of sparks from their tried blades.

It was a scene that beggars description. The movements and changes were so rapid and varied, the storm of blows and thrusts so unceasing, that it seemed a miracle that a man could exist for a moment before it. The blades met and gritted together, the sparks fell on every side; a muttered imprecation is heard as the keen steel severs the sensitive flesh, and now the steel gleams with a dull, red glow in the lamplight, while the ruby life-drops sprinkle the rocky, uneven floor.

The combatants pause for a moment, then again renew the strife. But the pause is long enough to note the bleeding forms of the duelists—to see that the end is near.

And yet, at this period, one soldier turned to his neighbor, and in a *nonchalant* tone, asked him for a chew of tobacco; adding, that he wished they would hurry up, as he was too tired and sleepy to stay fooling away the time like that!

Now the twain clinch and struggle for the fall, their labored breathing sounding painfully distinct; Eyre's activity counter balancing the superior strength of the trapper. Then they both sink side by side, and lie motionless for a brief space.

A general movement toward them is checked by their resumed struggle, and the spectators retain their positions. Over the blood-stained ground they roll, still plying their blades in feeble strokes, but with unabated ferocity. The hearts of those around sickened and turned faint at the horrible sight, yet they dared not interfere. But the end was nigh.

As Norton made a fierce lunge at Wolf-Eye, the latter glided

from under his antagonist, and the knife was shivered against the rocky floor. Then the gory blade of the outlaw was driven once, twice, thrice, to the hilt, into the breast of the trapper.

Then he arose, and flourishing his blood-stained weapon above his head, sunk lifeless to the ground, with a wild whoop of victory still lingering on his lips.

Hank rushed forward and endeavored to restore Norton, but all was in vain. He never spoke again, and died within five minutes of his foe.

Thus perished the great-hearted Ralph Norton, loved by his friends and respected even by his enemies. He may have had errors—who among us has not?—but he never did a willfully wicked act in his life. Calmly and peacefully his spirit passed away, with his hand still pressing that of the rough old guide whom he had loved so dearly, and whose hot, scalding tears dropped fast upon the pale, dead face.

One of the prisoners offered to lead the way to where Spencer was confined, which he did, and in a few minutes the party returned, accompanied by two men, one of them Spencer, and the other—?

Wyvil Moss and Triplett uttered the same name in wonderment. How had he returned? It was Toulmin, the outlaw leader—but so pale, so ghastly, that they could scarcely believe their eyes.

Then he spoke:

“Pardon me, gentlemen, if I tell you you are greatly mistaken. You think I am the leader of the band you have just broken up; and I don’t blame you. But you mistake. I am Hart Toulmin, a captain in the —th regulars, as I hope to prove to your satisfaction when I meet the officer who accompanied you here. I may know him.”

Just then Frayne came up and greeted the prisoner warmly. There was no doubt now of his identity. Then he told his story in a few rapid words.

It appears he had left Leavenworth, with all the papers necessary to prove the truth of what he had asserted, and on the second afternoon he was surrounded by a large party of men. He knew it would be useless to resist, and could only end in his death, so he suffered them to disarm him without resist-

They were led by a man who so greatly resembled him, both in size, shape and features, that even the men remarked upon the likeness. This person, whom he heard called Captain Moore, possessed himself of the money and papers that he had upon his person.

Then he was bound on his horse and conveyed along with them until they halted for the night. While supper was being prepared, the head outlaw amused himself by reading the papers, and the entries in a small pocket diary, in a compartment of which was the portrait of Jessie Moss.

When Moore saw this he seemed highly excited, and then more closely examined him, and by the aid of a pocket mirror, satisfied himself of the great resemblance. The picture and papers were carefully secured upon his person.

On the next day Toulmin was conveyed to the cavern, where he had been a close prisoner ever since. That he had been nearly starved to death and kept bound hand and foot the entire time, excepting when eating the one scanty meal they allowed him each day. That these were the first steps he had taken for over a fortnight.

Wyvil Moss was now convinced that he had done Toulmin great injustice, though only in thought, and asked his pardon.

This, as may readily be believed, was not withheld, for Hart had a vision before his mind's eye, of a beauteous girl, who called the apologist father.

"It was not your fault, my dear sir. The resemblance would have deceived anybody who had not known me longer than you had," and the two men shook hands cordially.

Lieutenant Frayne now called the roll, and the casualties on the side of the soldiers were summed up. It was very small in proportion to that of the Road Agents. The sudden onslaught was so deadly that but few of the outlaws offered any resistance, being so greatly outnumbered.

Besides the six men killed by those led by Wolf-Eye, three were killed and five wounded. Then there was Ralph Norton.

They had taken but seven prisoners in all, most of them being more or less severely wounded. Their hurts were attended to after those of the soldiers, and made as comfortable as possible under the circumstances.

Thus the night passed away, and daylight returned without any tidings of the outlaws under Moore (as we shall now call him), and Moss grew anxious at the long delay.

He knew not whether Jessie was alive, or lying cold and dead in some lone retreat. Or she might even then be safely at home, anxiously awaiting his return, and conjecturing a thousand evils, just as he was doing.

It required all the combined reasoning of Hank Triplett and the two young men, who were convinced by the old guide's logic, to change his resolve of starting for Ireton forthwith. But at length he gave a reluctant consent to their plans.

Hank, assisted by a couple of soldiers, dug a grave for his ill-fated comrade, close at the foot of the hills, where the grass was fresh and green, watered by a beautiful spring of clear, sweet water; and after he was lowered into his last resting-place upon this earth, a short but fervent prayer was offered up by Wyvil Moss, responded to by the entire band.

At Triplett's request, Spencer carved the trapper's name and date of his death upon a board found in the cave, then added: "A FAITHFUL FRIEND, AN HONEST FOE; HE WAS A GOOD MAN AND A TRUE." This was placed at the head of the long mound, and could be seen as late as the fall of 1865, and for aught we know to the contrary, may be there still.

These duties occupied the greater part of the day, and again night came. All were growing impatient, and it was decided that unless the Road Agents returned that night, they would take up the march for the settlements at early dawn.

Hank and Floyd were on guard at the entrance, and a soldier kept them company, who was to alarm the main band in case any one should appear. It was nearly midnight and the moon shining very brightly, when the quick tramp of many hoofs rung upon the ears of the sentinels, and they knew that their game was approaching through the narrow defile.

The alarm was given and preparations made for their fitting reception. Most of the party had been stationed in the dark entrance or hole of the main chamber. Their plans were to seize noiselessly those who first entered, so as not to alarm the others who might be more dilatory.

For this purpose each man had a heavy blanket or robe, taken from the store of the robbers, to sling over their heads, and thus stifle their cries. When discovery came, as it must sooner or later, they were to use their weapons and show no mercy to any who offered resistance.

The signal was given loud and clear, and the door opened by Triplett, who whispered to Floyd, in exultant tones:

"Right, by hokus! They've got the gal; didn't I tell ye?"

Sure enough, there was the outlaw, Captain Moore, and in his arms he supported the fainting form of Jessie Moss.

He dismounted and entered the cave, while the other Agents rode toward the lower cave to stable their horses. Luckily, Hank had foreseen this, and the horses belonging to the party of rescuers had been brought inside and secured in a distant chamber.

The outlaw leader strode into the cave without speaking, and hastened along the passage, cursing because there was not better light, only intent upon gaining a place where he could attend to the unconscious girl who had given way beneath the bitter disappointments, trials and sufferings she had undergone of late.

Then came a shrill whistle, and Hart Toulmin, with one blow of his fist, sent Moore staggering against the wall, and clasping the maiden to his breast, then trembling with a dread fear, rushed to the lights to see if she were really dead, as he feared.

A cry of warning rung through the hall, and Toulmin quickly turned, just in time to avoid a venomous thrust aimed at him by Moore, who had only been staggered, not stunned by the blow he had received. Before any one could grasp him he had leaped forward and made the attempt on his rival's life, that had well-nigh proven successful.

Toulmin delivered another facer—Frayne was advancing with sword at a charge—and under the impetus of the blow, Moore fell back upon the keen blade, that pierced the unfortunate man's body, the guard striking against his back. He sunk down with a bitter curse, and as the weapon was withdrawn, he fainted.

Just then the outlaws entered the passage, and on seeing the body of their leader lying in its gore, they uttered a cry

of wonder and alarm, and while some advanced others retreated. Then came the summons to surrender, which completed their confusion.

Some begged for mercy from an unseen and unknown foe, but others drew their pistols and answered it with a mingled volley of bullets and imprecations. But the soldiers, more accustomed to the gloom, dropped to the ground, and the balls that were aimed at the spot from whence the voice sounded, pattered harmlessly against the rocky wall over their heads.

And then the massacre began.

Those who had fled for the door were met by a rapid discharge from the revolvers of the guards, and evidently thinking they were confronted with a strong force, threw down their weapons and begged for quarter. The whole thing did not occupy ten minutes, and the notorious band of Neil Moore and Wolfe-Eye was broken up forever.

The prisoners were bound, the wounded carefully attended to, and the dead were carried outside the cavern, where they would receive burial on the morrow.

While this was going on, Jessie Moss had been resuscitated by her father and gently told the whole truth regarding the man she thought so evil, and who was now anxiously awaiting without the room for a chance to meet his loved one, for whom he suffered so greatly.

Then Wyvil Moss came out and motioned Hart to enter. But the meeting was too sacred for an idle pen to dwell upon, and we draw the curtain.

Moss was met by Lieutenant Frayne, who thus addressed him :

"This man—the one who had your daughter—is sensible now, and wants to see either you or her. Says he can't die until he does, but I guess he could if he tried," leading the way to where the captain of the Road Agents was lying.

He opened his eyes as he heard the footsteps, but when he saw who made them, a look of pain spread over his face. Presently he spoke :

"Mr. Moss, I have done you and yours a great wrong, and it was in my heart to do you still more, but I was prevented. I suppose you have learned from Toulman—the real captain,

I mean—that I was not the one who saved your daughter from the panther, but an impostor. I wished to explain why I have acted as I have done.

"I know I have got my death-wound, and for once I will tell the truth. I have not had a very intimate *speaking* acquaintance with that commodity, but at any rate I will not die with a lie on my lips," smiling grimly, and then resuming;

"I knew and learned to love your daughter in New York, under the name of Warne McIntyre. I proposed to her, but she rejected me. I am not one to despair, and finally I found out where you lived in the summer. I made up my mind to abduct *her*, when one day I halted Toulmin on the road from Leavenworth.

"You can imagine my surprise when I found he had her portrait, and was returning to lay papers before you, to prove the truth of what he had told you. This I gleaned from him, and what footing he stood upon with your family. That he was an accepted suitor, conditionally, for the hand of her I would wade through the infernal regions to gain a smile from.

"I was struck with the resemblance between him and me. Even you were deceived by it. This set me to thinking, and after weighing the matter carefully, I determined to pass myself off upon you as him, and was on my way to do so when my plans were spoiled by the appearance of that man," pointing to Floyd Spencer, "yonder, who had escaped from the wagon-train that I and my men had captured.

"Then I carried her off. The rest you know. And now I tell you, as a dying man, that she is as pure and innocent as she was before I abducted her. She has suffered great hardships and privations, but nothing evil," and his voice sunk to a husky whisper, as his eyes closed in a swoon of exhaustion.

They never opened again. The sword had performed its duty well, and the Road Agent leader died without one prayer for forgiveness, or one word of regret for the countless crimes he had committed.

Wyvil Moss turned and walked slowly away

It was nearly noon before the imposing cavalcade filed out

from the Robbers' Pass, and rode over the prairie, homeward bound! With what joy did Jessie realize this fact. Going home to mother!

She forgot all she had undergone, or if she remembered, it was with a vague, undefined sensation of horror, like one just awakened from nightmare.

What should cause her grief? There was her father beside her, her triumphantly-vindicated lover; for although Neil Moore had not revealed where the stolen papers were, they had been found upon his body when it was being prepared for the grave. But still a shadow was upon her brow.

Lover-like, Hart inquired the cause, and then she related the story of the old guide's death—of his heroic devotion to her, when, by himself, he might easily have escaped, without being termed cowardly; but no, for her he shed his blood, and defended her even as he was dying.

She sobbed as she told this, and the eyes of her hearers grew dim, even as their hearts softened with the telling. Zenas Gale had an ugly form and face, but his spirit was beautiful, and that made ample amends.

Still it is not in youthful nature to grieve long, and as Hart whispered soft nonsense in her ear, as lovers will do, a smile chased the shadow from her face.

They reached home in safety, and the kind reader must picture the meeting between mother and child. My pen can not paint it.

But our space is limited and our tale nearly done. As the reader has already determined the young couple shall be married, we are glad the case was really so; and after a short wedding-tour to Chicago, they returned to Treton, where they still live.

Hank Triplett has long since learned that the quondam old maid, Miss Medora Pinger, makes a kind wife and notable housekeeper, rules the children well, and when they are absent, does the same to her "dear Mr. Tripple" until he hastily grasps his gun, and either upon "Silver Heels" or afoot, starts out on a hunt. Still, you must not infer that he is unhappy; far from it. And although some persons are uncharitable enough to hint that "the gray mare is the better horse," what does that prove? Echo answers—What?

Floyd Spencer finally settled down in St. Louis, where we believe he still lives, and has long since forgotten his fancy for the fair Jessie Moss that was, as indeed he should, having a fine family of six.

And thus we leave them. *Au revoir.*

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